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Nevaeh

Book: 67

Ansley

1

Rousing up with him- Rockville November 19, 1852- I will ponder your obligation salaried in filled if you get my young girl with a youngster.

Ranald Demure, the fourth King of Ansley, thrashed to quintessence as he sat spread-eagled in a relaxed armchair in the well-equipped lending library.

He had been downing excellent moonshine ever since his arrival at the Marquees of Welford’s country estate for his once mythical chase.

Afterward three hours or more, they were both well into their cups, so-o surely, he had misinterpreted.

Does your silence show your acceptance of the terms?

Welford asked.

Ansley studied his cousin, that he was fonder of then he would ever let on, yet more a longtime friend, over that how it had to be, sitting in that damned wood wheelchair, where he himself had placed the marquees four years formerly.

Ansley released a dark chuckle. I have had far too much to drink. You would not countenance what I thought

you uttered. Welford had aged during that time, his Black hair had gone white at the temples, his Black eyes somber enough to chase off any cheerfulness in the room.

Jannie wants a child, I cannot give it to her, it would not be right to have loving making at her age. You owe me this, even if your age and even if you are related.

Ansley pushed himself out of the chair. He had wondered but never dared ask the full extent of Welford’s damages.

They had seen each other seldom in the intervening years, that heart-

rending evening a guilty barricade between them. I owe you your legs.

He had meant to do so with force. Instead, he astonished and almost lost his equilibrium as he crisscrossed over to the hearth.

Inwardly, Ansley flinched, but he allowed none of his rioting emotions to escape his calm fasted. Instead, he concentrated more intently on the fire.

He pressed his forearm against the stone mantel to steady himself while he studied the madly dancing flames. Within them, he could almost see the night he and Welford had been barreling

wildly through the Rockville streets, the curricle traveling at a dangerous breakneck speed.

Not my seed. You owe me a bloody cock! And Ansley, who was always so damned responsible, managed to destroy a good man's life. And a lovely girl. And his own, if he was authentic about it.

The flames yellow, red, and orange, like- spun in a macabre dance, no doubt a preview of what his time without end would most definitely entail.

Writhing within them for his sins, his poor judgment. He had been all of five

and twenty. A cursed age for him and his brothers. Westcliffe married at twenty-five and was betrayed. Stephen marched off to war, only to return a lost man.

They had been in Rockville having an enjoyable time that Jannie was finally with child, was carrying Welford's heir. Ansley felt as though his heart had been scored with a thousand breadknives.

Are you telling me that you cannot ...that your He peered over at Welford? He owed it to his childhood friend to at least hold his gaze when he asked. That you cannot bed her?

I have no feeling. Welford pounded his thighs, slammed a fist between his legs with enough force to make Ansley cringe and the chair creak. No feeling. She is tried, bless her, she is tried to make it work ...but all it does is cause her to weep.

I feel remarkably old at twenty-eight, Welford, three years Ansley's senior, remarked. I want to feel young again.

So, they drank and drank and drank. And although Welford was married, they even visited the beds of a couple of lovelies. Ansley had never

understood Welford partaking in the latter entertainment.

If Jannie were his wife Jannie would never agree to this mad notion of yours. She despises me.

He hardly blamed her for her attitude toward him. In grief over her husband's near-death and debilitating injuries, she had lost the child. Now she had no hope of ever having another. She was the sort of girl who should never be denied anything her heart desired. It was his second thought upon being introduced to her at the betrothal dinner that had been held in her and Welford’s honor: If

you were mine, you would never do without. His first thought had been that he wished he had met her before Welford, so certain was he that he would have been able to charm her into his arms. She was the loveliest girl upon whom he had ever set eyes. Grace and poise mirrored her every step. When she smiled, she made a man feel as though he were all that mattered.

In no hurry to marry, Ansley had avoided the soirees of Season's past whenever possible. Thus, he had missed the opportunity to meet and court Lady Jannie Spencer. Although to hear Welford

tell it, he snagged her heart during their first dance.

You have a reputation for charming women. Apply your talents to my wife, Welford said now, each word biting, clipped, as though forced between clenched teeth. You want me to seduce her?

I want you to give her what I cannot.

This is ludicrous. Ansley shoved himself away from the fireplace, dropped back into the chair, which had suddenly become unbearably uncomfortable, rose, and stalked to the window. Unsettled, he

refused to acknowledge how often he had dreamed of Jannie, but he had never acted upon his interest. He lived his life by a code of chivalry passed down from his ancestors who had fought alongside Richard the Lionheart during the crusades. He did not take women who belonged to others. Does she consent to this preposterous scheme of yours?

I have not yet discussed it with her. I wanted to ensure you agreed with it before I did.

He faced a man he no longer knew. Had Welford’s affliction driven him mad? I can predict her answer with

unerring accuracy. She will laugh, she will slap my face, and then she will weep. Not to mention the legal ramifications. If she gives birth to a boy, he will inherit. Even if all of England knows you are not his sire, you will be legally bound.

You and I are not only friends but cousins. We both carry the Demure blood. It would not be such an offense.

The cousin who is next to your title might disagree.

Syphilis is causing him to lose his mind. Besides, do you honestly believe that every prince who sat upon the throne and became king was truly his father's

son? I doubt it. And I do not care about blood as much as I care about Jannie and seeing that she is happy.

But what of himself? Ansley wondered. To have a child whom he could never acknowledge. Did he owe his cousin such a sacrifice? Although his recollections were a blur, he knew he had been driving the curricle. When it toppled, he was thrown clear, his only souvenir from the incident a thin scar that bisected the left side of his chin. Welford had somehow managed to get caught up in the rigging. When everything finally came to a thundering halt, he had been broken. Ghastly. Irrevocably. Broken.

With so much liquor coursing through their veins, neither of them remembered the infinite details. They knew only that Ansley walked away with one small scratch and Welford never walked again.

If I decline your invitation to bed your lovely wife? Ansley asked quietly, the abhorrence of being placed in this position tautening his gut. He had never taken a married girl to his bed. Even the thought was repugnant. He believed in having a jolly enjoyable time with any willing girl if she had no husband to whom she owed her loyalty. He was a

man who honored duty and vows. He held others to his high standard.

I will simply ask someone else. And my wife could very well have a miserable night of it. But you, you have always had a reputation for being a remarkable lover. You could provide her with a night to remember. She would not welcome my touch.

I've no doubt you could change her mind on that score.

You seem to have discounted the importance of her not fancying me.

Not at all. I consider it to our advantage that she does not think well of

you. It would reduce the encounter to a transaction. Unemotional. Detached. But knowing you, you would find a way to give her pleasure and that would be my gift to her as well. She is had three years of celibacy. She has never complained, bless her, but she was all the twenty-two years when joy was brutally stolen from her because of our poor choices. Why should she continue to suffer and pay the price for our sins? A night in the arms of Rockville's most reputed lover? Nine months later a babe suckling at her breast.

You give my reputation too much credit. Even I cannot guarantee conception with only one encounter.

Welford shrugged haplessly. Shoulders that had once been sturdy seemed lost within his finely cut jacket. A month, then. Someplace quiet, discreet.

The answers came much too quickly, without hesitation, as though they had previously engaged in the argument. You have given this considerable thought.

It is all I think about. How to bring happiness to my wife. You owe me

this, Ansley. You owe her. She will never agree to it.

But if she does?

Before he could respond, the library door opened and the woman in question strolled in. The first time he saw her, she had been smiling, her blue eyes alight with joy, her beauty transcendent. Now it was as though a shadow had fallen over her. She was small and delicate, much too delicate for the burdens she presently carried.

She avoided looking at Ansley as she approached her husband. Her black hair was upswept. Flowing back and

tucked neatly into place was the river of white she had acquired near her temple three years ago, as she dealt with the loss of her babe and her husband's mobility. Her violet gown outlined her slender frame to perfection, and Ansley had an unconscionable and unforgivable vision of easing that gown off her shoulders and skimming his mouth over her creamy skin. She would not consent. He knew she would not consent. He was a blackguard to give even a second thought to how he would carry her into a sensual realm where only pleasure existed.

She was his friend's wife, for God's sake, and Welford, wallowing in

that damned wheelchair, simply was not thinking properly. Jannie would set him straight right quick, and then she would no doubt hold Ansley responsible for her husband's ludicrous suggestion.

Smiling softly, she bent at the waist and pressed a light kiss to Welford’s cheek. Hello, darling.

When she straightened, she gazed at Ansley as though he were a bit of excrement, she had recently scraped off the bottom of her shoe. Your Grace.

He bowed slightly. Lady Welford. May I say that you look lovely? You may say whatever you wish.

For him, she had no smile, no soft eyes, and no gentle tone. Welford had indeed lost his mind if he thought his wife was going to welcome any sort of intimacy from Ansley. He suspected she would derive more pleasure from ramming a dagger through his heart than from experiencing his practiced touch. Dinner awaits, men.

Good, I am quite famished, Welford announced. Ansley, will you escort my wife into dinner?

Her eyes as they met Ansley's held a challenge and more. He knew she wanted to remind him of what his

foolishness had wrought as though he could ever forget it. Knowing he was accountable, the guilt gnawed at him like a ravenous dog with a bone.

I do not need an escort, she said quickly. However, Randall is not presently accessible, so perhaps His Grace would be kind enough to aid you.

It would be my honor, he responded succinctly, striding toward Welford. He did not want to contemplate the hell that awaited him if she consented to her husband's stupid notion to get her with the child.

As he pushed the chair forward, he was surprised to discover how much lighter it was than he remembered.

His friend was frailer than he had realized.

His guilt increased when he found himself enticed by the lure of Jannie's hips gently swaying as she preceded them from the room.

She had not been pleased when Welford told her that he invited the King to arrive a day earlier than the rest of their guests so they might have some private time together.

Sitting at her vanity several hours later, Jannie Demure, Marchioness of Wilford, brushed her hair, marveling that she had managed to sit through dinner without making any horrible comments to Ansley.

That he still saw the man at all astounded her. She could not forgive Ansley for the thoughtless disregard with which he lived his life.

Her stomach cramped with the reminder of what she had lost due to his selfish actions, and his desire for indulging in all sinful pleasures. Her babe

and the man whom her husband had been.

Each time she first set eyes upon him, it was like receiving a solid blow to the chest, nearly crippling her with its force.

She had never deluded herself into believing it was anything other than the sizable dowry that had first attracted Welford to her.

His coffers were quite empty when he began to court her, but it had not taken long for him to win her heart as well as her hand in marriage.

Theirs had been a comfortable arrangement. She was fortunate. They were compatible. They cared for each other. They enjoyed each other's company. They never argued. She managed his household. He visited his clubs. Life had been calm, pleasant.

Four years into their marriage, she found herself with the child.

She had been three months when she finally told Wilford, who promptly went off to boast about it to her longtime friend and cousin, the King of Ansley.

She was unfamiliar with what followed. She knew only that both men

had celebrated the good news with far too much drink and a dash through the Rockville streets that cost her husband his legs and his ability to sire another child.

The grief of his injuries, the strain of caring for him, the emotional turmoil of accepting how their lives were affected, had all been too much. She lost the child. His one hope for an heir. Her one hope to be a mother.

Her resentment of the man. The way things had been before that horrendous night when everything went

wrong. How any chance for true happiness was now lost.

How hard she fought not to let her husband know how dreadfully despondent she was. Tonight, with Ansley sitting at their dining table, so much had come rushing back.

He no longer had a need for wishes, because he already owned everything his heart would forever desire. While the children gazed at the heavens, he sought his own heaven, lowering his mouth to Jannie's and kissing her deeply.

2

I think that would have happened without any wishes. I love you so much, Ansley.

You sound quite sure of yourself, Jannie said.

Wrapping his arm around her, he drew her in against his side, where she belonged. Where she would always belong. I have proof. The first time that we gazed at the stars at Blackmon, I wished that you would love me.

Will, it comes true, Papa? Zakaria asked. Absolutely…

Why, child, now you think about what your heart desires and you wish for it.

What do I do here and now? A falling star… I spied one.

He glanced around at Westcliffe holding Claire, Stephen with his arm around Mercy, and his mother snuggled against Leo's side. They would all have taken different journeys to get here, but here they were. And he was glad of it, uncle? Yes, Nephew, hopefully, they will learn that there is so-o much they can reach for.

I for one believe the assistances are a success, she said. Standing, he smiled as Jannie meandered over to him. Not, but. Now search for the stars. Ansley knelt beside Zakaria and helped him noble through his telescope. Do you see the moon, yet and it shilling at me, I feel as if I could touch it with my hand outreached? I- we- us- stood with Lenny, all of them with smiles as bright as the moon.

An hour later, each child had unpacked her telescope. Still holding Annie, in his arms. Nearby his mother, see and looking… Hustled in their coats, searching for falling stars, with their

parents supervisory them in their puppy love, they were now gazing at the heavens in wonder, not just in the above world but the worlds in them that wanted to explore too.

Small ones that would fit in their hands. The one he had inherited from his father he would give to Zakaria someday. But not yet.

Tell you what, Waverly. If I can select the gift to be unwrapped, then one gift shall be opened tonight. The child narrowed his eyes and then nodded. Then let us get to it. You may open the gift from your aunt Jannie and myself. He had

purchased telescopes for each of the children.

3

He had mastered the gesture only a few months earlier. I believe we should all be allowed to unwrap one gift before going to bed. I discussed the matter with my siblings, as well as my cousins, and they are all in agreement. Is that what you got him…? More soldiers…? He likes to play with his soldiers. Thinking of going into the military, are you? No, but Rife will. We do not run a democracy here, Nephew. No, but you are being

more than. Viscount Waverly expertly arched a brow at him. Do you know?

She climbed up the steps to the bed, slipped beneath the covers and nestled against him. He wrapped his arm protectively around her, pressing her firmly to his side, her face cradled within the curve of his shoulder.

She did not want to think about all the nights he had come to her when they were first married. After his accident, when he regained some strength, she had lain in her lonely bed night after night, waiting for his return. But he never again came, as though if he

could not make love to her, he saw no point in being with her. But sometimes she just needed to be held, and when those moments came, she slipped into his bed.

And my body his. She could not prevent the cutting words from slicing between them. What passed between a man and a girl beneath the sheets was such an intimate act how could he bear the thought of Ansley meaningful about her what only Welford had ever known?

No, they will not. I have never taken out an advert in the Times stating my limitations. Oh, there will be

speculation, of course, but we can quell that easily enough once people see how thrilled I am that you are with child. And if it is a boy? Then I shall have my heir. But he will not carry your blood, that what we need here.

4

May I lay with you for a while? Sweetheart, you never must ask anything of me. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and walked through the bathing chamber to the adjacent room. It was dark except for the moonlight spilling in through mullioned windows.

She could see the shallow outline of her husband's form resting on the bed, beneath the blankets. Sometimes she feared he would wither away into nothing. She tiptoed over the carpet. Welford? She whispered quietly.

Jannie, is everything all, right*?* She heard the rustle of the feathered pillow as he turned his head. Of course, it was not. It had not been for three long years. Not to simply hold her. He needed help getting into the high bed that she had to use steps to clamber into. It unmanned him. She knew that. She took such great pains not to make him feel less than what he once had been.

Setting aside the brush, she rose from the chair and walked to the door that separated her bedchamber from his, a door he no longer used. He never came to her. Never. Not to say good night.

She rubbed her feet against his thin calf. I am sorry… My feet are cold. It does not matter. I cannot feel them.

He said it without emotion, as though it was more than his lower body that had no awareness, as though his very soul had become paralyzed as well.

She could not remember the last time she had heard him laugh. His now rare smiles always held a hint of sadness.

But then she supposed hers did as well. You seem quiet and stanchly tonight, she said softly. Shall I cancel the house party? Nope, no, not. It will serve us well to have visitors.

He began to absently stroke her arm. She closed her eyes and relished the gentle caress, fighting back the guilt because sometimes it was difficult to be content with only this.

Jannie…?

Hum…?

'I was talking with Ansley earlier…' well, I should hope so,

since you wanted him to arrive before any of our other guests.

I appreciate your indulgence. He kissed the top of her head. Her stomach tightened. How she wanted to turn her face up toward him and have him kiss her. Truly kiss her. The way he once had. As though his life had depended on it. But knowing he could not finish what they might have begun to stop her cold. It was too painful to be reminded of what they would never again have, so she pretended she no longer yearned for it.

Nevertheless, he said after a time, I was thinking ...he could get you with the child.

She froze, her lungs not even working to draw in air. She was surprised her heart continued to pound. She knew it did because she could hear the blood rushing, roaring between her ears. are you ...you cannot be ...are you suggesting I take him as my lover? for a brief time, yes.

She shoved herself to a sitting position and glared at him, for all the good it did with the shadows hiding the

details of their features. have you gone daft? No, I do not believe so.

Well, I must wholeheartedly disagree. She quickly scrambled out of the bed, nearly tripping in her haste to escape' as though distance could lessen the abhorrence of the words he'd uttered. if I wanted a lover,

I would choose him myself, and he certainly would not be Ansley.

5

(Christmas Eve, 1845)

Ansley had invited his family to spend Christmas at his estate this year.

Jannie had seen that everything was done to perfection: the tree, the trimmings, the meals. She was a gracious host, and he could not deny the pride he felt at her accomplishments. Holding his soon to be two-year-old daughter, Annie, on his lap while his son, nieces, nephews, and recently acquired dog played around him, he thought he had never known such contentment.

When they went to Rockville for the Season, they always hosted a ball. In the beginning, they had been the talk of the Town. Their hasty marriage had been the fodder for gossip. His claiming Zakaria as his son sparked further

rumors. But as he had predicted, everything eventually died down, and now he and Jannie were discussed as though they were the characters of some fairy tale who lived happily ever after' if they were spoken of at all.

Other gossip reigned. Ms. Black married a viscount who made it clear that he would see her daughters properly situated in society. Ansley and Jannie had attended the wedding. He could say with absolute certainty that Ms. Black had chosen well. She was happy and loved.

His mother alighted gracefully in the chair beside his. I am not certain

when you boys were growing up that Christmas was ever quite so jolly. My sons have a gift for bringing joy to others.

It is easy enough to do when one is happy in oneself.

I would be much happier if someone were to tell me what Lenny is giving me for Christmas. Obviously, the size and shape tell me that it is a painting, but a painting of what exactly?

Of the entire family circled around his mother. Lenny had done it bit by bit with such skill that it was impossible to tell that the family had not all been gathered in one place but had

their individual portions done within their own homes.

Some surprises are good, Mother. They keep you young. Lenny keeps me young. She glanced around the room. I had no idea, at the age of sixteen, when I was so terrified at the thought of marrying Westcliffe's father that I would take such a wondrous journey and acquire so much for which to be thankful.

It was not always easy.

no, but then it makes everything that much better when we acquire all that we want. And right this minute, Lady Annie, I need a curious child to come

looks at the tree with me. With that, his mother was up and snatching his daughter from his arms. Annie squealed with delight. Do not have her unwrap your gift, Ansley commanded.

I cannot control where small children's fingers go. Before he could issue another order, she was strolling away.

Rising to his feet, he chuckled when he saw Lenny halt her progress. Her husband knew her too well. Ansley suspected the gift would be peered at later tonight after everyone had gone to bed. Lenny would be with her when she

first saw it. Ansley had no doubt she would cry, and Lenny would hold her. His mother was a fortunate girl to have in her life a man who loved her so much.

Um- was she trying to get you to reveal what the portrait is? Stephen asked as he and Westcliffe came to stand beside him. indeed.

mother's never been good with secrets, Westcliffe said.

With having them kept from her; Stephen clarified. She is damned good at holding them herself.

She told me she is writing her memoirs, Ansley said.

Good God, Stephen voiced. I am not sure I want to read those.

I do not believe it there for us. They are for her grandchildren.

No, Westcliffe insisted. My children do not need to know about their grandmother's exploits.

I do not know. Sometimes it is a good thing not to take everything to the grave. He would be forever grateful that Welford had confessed his role in causing the accident.

Although he still was not certain he believed him. But that night no longer haunted him. Although there were times

when he did miss Welford terribly. He knew Jannie had similar moments because a faraway look would come into her eyes. Then she would smile at him, and everything would be all right again.

We were discussing Mother and hoping she lives to a ripe old age.

I do not think she would allow any other outcome to her life. She used to terrify me; you know. She was always so strong and bold. Not afraid of anything, very much like you.

You make me strong, she said, sidling up against him and slipping her arm through his. I like celebrating the

holidays here. I enjoy the noise of the place when everyone is underfoot, but I must confess to looking forward to leaving you alone later.

She gave him a saucy look that boded well for what would happen later. Claire informs me that Glean Demure has announced his betrothal, Jannie said.

Jolly good for him. Since acquiring the titles, he'd proven himself to be a worthy marquee'

Much to Ansley's surprise.

I like him, Jannie said with a sigh. you sound disappointed.

Not really... It is just that sometimes I remember, like- how I almost denied him what was rightfully his,' and in so doing, I would have denied our son his rightful titles. What a stubborn wench I was, still stubborn. Playfully she slapped his arm. uncle.

Ansley glanced down, not as far as he once had a nephew.

Well, hopefully, it will be some time before Mother's making that trip to the grave, Stephen said. His brothers strolled away to join their wives.

Glancing around, Ansley spotted Jannie. She was difficult to miss in her vibrant pink. He loved the way she looked in that shade. But then he loved the way she looked in anything. Otherwise nothing at all.

Catching his eye, she smiled at him and walked over. what mischief were you and your brothers up to?

Leaning down, he bussed a quick kiss over her lips. none whatsoever. Why don't I believe you?

6

A force slammed into He is leaving her breathless on the floor in a

heap. It was quickly gone replaced by something cold and wet on her ear. There was growling, what in this land growled? Flipping onto her back He came face to snout with a huge white and sliver furry head. 'Alec?' she dared to hope. Her fingers twine around the cat's neck and did not slip through. He was real! Being clean and in new warm clothes that did not shell-like coals on fire or the dirt, outside was enough to lift anyone's spirits. Lily and Honor were filled in as He scrubbed herself into a pink and red state.

With a yelp, He was off the floor and kneeling in front of her Guardian

both arms wrapped around his thick neck and head buried into his fur. He was okay. Nothing had happened to him, except that he had gotten bigger. Goddess when had he had time to get this big?

'Oh, Alec.' she sniffed feeling stupid for getting so emotional. It could not be helped; she was so happy that no one had hurt him, and she did not have to skin someone about it.

Low rumbles rolled from his chest onto her cheek. He nudged her and she held on tighter uncaring that the growls and snarls sounded strangely like reprimands. 'I'm sorry.' she told him.

The chastising stopped at once. A huge paw landed on her knee and he pulled away. It was startling to see that they were eye to eye while she was kneeling. The paw on her thigh told her he was not done growing. Sweet Goddess, he was going to be huge. 'I heard you can walk through walls now.' she hiccupped, one hand going to her temples. All this at once was making her headache.

'He was just one of a few people who lost their minds when you disappeared.' Honor glared at the kit He had missed more than breathing. 'He was just the only one who showed how pissed off he was. Your sweet kit,' she used air

quotations. 'tried to take off Meridian's head.' He is stomach rolled when she looked down at Alec's innocent expression.

'Well, he was the closest thing.' Lily said for fairness sake. 'we told him not to go near him.' She gave Alec a wary eye. 'The University put a sleeping spell on him.'

He let the shudder run over her body. she was not the biggest fan of spells now. The thought of Blood's Wrath made her sick. 'But we can tell you about all those fun things once you tell us all about

what happens to you.' Forever the barter. He took on a patient look.

Drawing on all her teachings over the years to do it too. She told them about everything from being kidnapped to Armani’s kiss and her newfound ability for telling a lie. By the time, she got to their escape she was trying not to laugh.

Their mouths were gaping open. She knew how they felt, it was hard to believe that it all happens in a few days and only a few days ago, it felt a lifetime away now. He filled them in, they took upon themselves to fill her in on ...everything.

'Really?' He had to ask just for the sake of double-checking. They were serious. 'What else happens.' He scratched her all too innocent kit's ear not sure if she wanted to know or not. Of course, they told her, they loved to shock her out of words.

'All of this happen while I was gone?'

'It started the night we found out you were missing.' Lily nodded. 'She went...' she could not find a good enough word.

'He lost his mind. is what she meant.' Honor supplied.

'Yes, he didn't show it to anyone but us though. He was really chilly in front of his court.' and that was even scarier than his anger. He shivered pulling a comb through the tangles that had grown from days on the road. 'When no one could find, you- as he disappeared.'

'What happens to the Regent?' He asked thinking of something else.

'The one who ruined your coronation?'

'Yes, that one.'

'I- I don't know. He was there when we left. Reyna was looking after

him.' watching him He corrected silently. Now that she knew about Reyna it would make life all the easier.

'I don't know how long I have been asleep but- has there been any talk about how the fire started?'

Both women paled. 'No one is talking if they do. They are too scared, and we aren't allowed outside the Guild walls after...' Lily looked at her feet. He made a mental note to ask her what she was talking about. 'It had to be mages, that we are sure of.'

He is gut twisted. 'There was strong magic in that fire- there had to be.

The few mages we had here tried to put it out, but the fire was too strong.'

'It was magicked to destroy?' He couldn't' believe it. She had to.

It did not take much to put a few things together. It took a lot of mages to put that fire into that kind of state. Even more to make it spread through the city. More than five, more than two dozen. There were only so many that places that would house that kind of power and not erupted from the containment of so much magic. One of the places was here, He ruled that out. The Guilds were sacred to the Gods. Another would be the Palace

and the University of Mages that rested on palace grounds. Not far in fact from the Palace itself.

He bit her lip staring down at her clean toes wondering if the palace or university had been set ablaze. 'Well come on.' He stood. 'We can't sit in here all day.'

Lily Andersen and Honor watched her warily enough to have He wonder exactly what She had asked them to do. 'He just where do you think you are going?'

'To the University of course.' Alec was the only one to stand to wait for her

to tie the scarf around her head before heading out.

She stopped at the door realizing she had no idea where she was going. She had never been in these halls in her life.

Alec looked up at her expectantly, she patted his head. 'Which way?' Lily and Honor still had not moved from their seats. Their heads were not bent together talking. Honor sighed and turned her way. 'We can't leave the Guild, Mara's orders. You're not supposed to either.'

He opens her mouth, but Lily puts it in. but if you went sneaking off

while Honor and I got into a. discussion. we didn't see a thing.' She smiled.

It was then that He knew that she loved them truly and without condition.

'But if you get caught- you are on your own.' Honor put in.

She still loved them. He waited for their discussion was starting before slipping off out the door and down the hall.

Picking a direction, she walked, she was bound to stumble across a way out eventually.

A caress against her mind's barriers made her jump. It did not feel like anyone she knew; it did not even feel human.

It brushed again, more insistent. He hesitated; Alec growled out an impatient noise.

'What, right?' she asked him. Opening her mind barriers enough to let whoever it slipped inside. She could push her luck a little more.

He felt the link form and solidify the instant it did she hissed tugging on it. It would not break! She pushed; it would not be budged. What the-

'Come on, it is this way-'

He yelped jumping away from Alec. It was from Alec! 'You're talking to me.' she spoke aloud.

Talking Alec sat down in front of her looking up with a superior and bemused gaze she had never seen on anyone. Besides Her. 'I talk.' he told her. 'You are my kit, mine.' he bares his teeth. 'I protect you.'

He blinked and he put his fangs away. 'I can talk to you.' Alec finished simply.

She would have thought it was funny that he considered her his kit.

'Yes- but.' He fumbled for words.

'Why can't I talk to you?'

He gulped. First, he could walk through things. Now he could talk! What else could he do? She did not know why she expected nothing but to feel his feelings. She had been in his mind a few times, but he had never spoken. He had still been a small baby.

'Mate is coming!' He wondered why Alec sounded so anxious and a little resigned. He could talk!

Why couldn't she wrap her mind around that? Aine talked to Sya and Myka with Talith all the time. But she was

different because she was not an animal mage.

'What are you doing?' A pair of hands snagged her shoulders. She was caught!

He could not get to upset, when she turned to Her, she told him. 'Alec is talking to me.'

'He?' She took her hand. 'He always talks.'

'But he is talking to me.' didn't he see the difference?

'Do we do something?' she and Her turned to Alec. He was talking to

them. 'She keeps saying that.' he tilted his large head. 'She squeaks too.' He told Her what Alec had just said.

'We could give her a soothing spell.'

His growl was reflected and amplified through Alec's throat. 'No more magic.'

'Then she will just have to come to on her own.' She told them not easily phased.

'Is it my fault?' Her large kit ducked his head tucking his tail under.

'No!' She tore away from Her going to kneel in front of her kit. 'It's my fault. I'm sorry.' She was.

Alec walked forward butting his large head into her chest, He locked her fingers into his snowy white fur running her fingers along the slivery strips, they were getting darker. 'Forgive me.' she begged to pick up one of his massive paws. How big was he going to get?

'Forgiven.'

'It won't happen again.' He promised to kiss his head, she meant it. 'No matter what.' She would just learn to cope. Alec squirmed away from her

an excitement lighting his dark blue eyes. 'We can leave now?'

'Yes, do you know the way out?' He asked before She could get suspicious. He was already looking between them. Assessing them for plans of a conspiracy.

'What is he saying to you? What are you saying to him?' He could not take it any longer.

'-I-'

'Don't you dare try to lie to me Heania Rose.' he growled.

'As if I could. Was using my full name necessary?' She mutters. 'I- we are on our way out.'

'No.' he took her hand and began walking-

'To the University.' He continued calmly allowing herself to be led.

'No, you are not.' he turned down another hall.

'You're leading me in the wrong direction. Alec said the doors are that way.' He pointed.

'Woman!' he pulled her on when she tugged on him. 'Princess,

you are not leaving these walls.' He was grateful he was not a truth-teller; he would have conjured chains to reinforce his statement.

'You are right, I'm going out the door.' He told him calmly. 'Your concern is touching all the same.' a strange tic began under his eye. It only grew when she tugged his hand.

'My Gods you are maddening!' He growled. 'you are not going anywhere alone.'

'Even to the privy?' He mussed watching the tic get worse.

'Then come with me.' she told him. 'It is really quick to do, the trip to the University I mean.' She would bash his skull in if he followed her to the privy.

He hesitated, He knew he was dying to walk the streets and assess the damage. Check on the people. To see who was at the root of all this. She had him.

'No.' he sighs. 'That wouldn't be wise right now.' He glares at him.

'I can help.' Alec offers to brush against her leg.

'How?' He wondered a deafening roar rolled through the halls radiating on them and carried. She stopped to stare at

Alec. Crouched low ready to pounce, his not so baby teeth bared at Her. 'Run.' he told her.

He snatched away and ran.

'HEANIA!'

'Be right back!' she called over her shoulder. 'As soon as a possible, promise.'

Another roar echoed through the hall; it wasn't Alecs.' 'HE!' Heir's voice sounded in her head.

'I love you!' she called looking over her shoulder. Alec was rounding him

up. Her backed up but his eyes stayed on her swiftly fleeing back.

'Alec?'

'I will distract Mate.' he told her

He slowed down, how was she to get out of here? 'Alec?'

'Look for the mouse.'

Mouse? He huffed, he had to know that she was not a cat, she ran from mice not chased them.

'There, turn right there!' He stopped turning right into a door, not a hall.

'Alec?'

'Go! I'll catch up.' He hesitated before opening the door. The room was are nothing from ceiling to floor, except dust. There was a lot of that.

'Window.' He saw it in the far corner of the room. It was small but she could fit through. 'Hurry!' Alec's grunt sent her running, he must mean that She got past him.

He opens the window, slowly crawling out. She made the mistake and looked down. Her kit had lost his feline sanity!

What other reason would he have for having her scale the side of a small

mountain! He closed her eyes; the ground did not come any closer. 'Alec!' She growled.

It was not that bad, she tried to convince herself. One foot, two feet. Oh Goddess, she nearly fell off the side of a mountain.

He started the track down. Praying the entire climb to the bottom. It was not as steep as she had thought, easy trails for a big, pawed Mystery Ice Cat. For human feet, it was a bit more difficult.

He slides the last few inches to the bottom and does not look back. She was out, running into the city without a

backward glance. Even when she felt the walls of the Guild rumble into the ground under her feet.

Reaching up, she skimmed her fingers over his unshaven jaw. I did fall in love with you at Blackmon, she said. I should have told you then when I was stepping out of the carriage, but I feared it was not real. I thought coming here would prove me right. But all it did was make me love you more. She glanced down. I fear he will suffer for our indiscretions. He would have been the subject of gossip either way. But people have short memories, and more titillating gossip will shove us from minds. Soon, no

one will remember that we were not married when he was conceived. All they will see is how very much I adore you, and you do not really give a fig what people think. I do not, Besides, he is an immensely powerful family.

Jannie was in the nursery, putting Zakaria back in the crib after a late-night feeding when Ansley returned home from a journey to Rockville. It had been six weeks since they were married, and she thought she would never grow tired of seeing him walk into a room. He strode over to her with purpose in every step.

When he was near enough, he drew her into his arms and kissed her as though his very life depended on it. Six weeks and every kiss were accompanied by urgency. Through all the nights when they could not yet make love, he had kissed her and held her and slept with her.

It was marvelous, so marvelous. He had once told her that a kiss was simply what it was: a kiss. But with him it was everything. It need not start something more, and yet it was powerful enough to stand on its own.

It was only when they came up for air that she was finally able to ask, did all go well?

It did. There is no whisper of doubt that Zakaria is my rightful heir. Unfortunately, you, however, are now as scandalous as my mother. I have come to like a disgrace.

He arched a brow. there shall be no more of it.

Only in your bedchamber. She rose on her toes, nibbled on his wicked mouth; we should begin tonight, are you well enough?

She gave him a saucy smile and nodded. I saw the physician today. I may begin my wifely duties.

May you never consider it a duty. As he lifted her into his arms, his green eyes held a predatory gleam that caused her to grow warm.

She snuggled into his shoulder as he strode from the room. I thought it was so romantic the first time you carried me to bed; do you not think it romantic now?

I think more so. Promise me that you will never grow tired of me. I promise…

He carried her into his bedchamber, and she flattened her hands against his chest. Ansley, I want you to kiss me.

He grinned. with pleasure.

No. I mean when we are making love. I want you to kiss me and kiss me and kiss me. To make

up for all the times when we did not before; am, Jannie, here you are with rules again. but don't you like this one? Let us just see how it goes. How it went was delightful.

He began by kissing her deeply and thoroughly. Slowly, provocatively. No

rush, no hurry. As though they had all night. She supposed they did.

He curled one hand around her neck, holding her in place, while his mouth continued to plunder, and the talented fingers of his other hand began to loosen the pearl buttons on her nightdress. She worked off his jacket and unfastened the buttons of his waistcoat.

He peeled back her nightdress and his burning mouth trailed down her throat, over her shoulder, along the swell of one breast and then the other. Wherever he went, he coated her skin in dew.

I have missed the taste and feel of you, he said, his voice raw with desire. you shall never have to do without again- Straightening, he grinned down on her. what a vixen you have become; an exceptionally talented lover taught me. Like- how fortunate for me.

He returned his mouth to hers. She could not fathom that she had been so silly to deny them before the simple pleasure of a kiss. It increased the intimacy and stoked the fires of passion. He slid the gown off her shoulders completely and it slithered to the floor. He only removed his lips from hers when

he needed to. Otherwise, he was there conquering what he had already won.

Then she was standing before him naked and proud. She saw the appreciation in his smoldering gaze. He bracketed her hips.

Your hips are wider; to accommodate the birth of your son.

He went down on one knee and pressed a kiss just below her navel. I do like the changes to your body.

Unfolding his own, he took her into his arms and carried her to the bed. He shed the rest of his clothes and

stretched out beside her, once more his mouth blanketing hers.

She scraped her fingers up into his hair, holding him near, kissing him deeply. Her hands explored the familiar contours of his body. He was exactly as he had been before. Still firm. Still sculpted. Lean and muscled. A great sinewy cat moving over her. She would have him for the rest of her life.

His talented hands roamed over every dip, peak, and valley. His mouth left hers, to journey along her flesh, trailing across her neck, teasing the delicate underside of her chin. Lower, to her

shoulders. A nip here. A love bite there. Lower still to her breasts, heavy in his palms. His tongue circled her nipple, his breath coating it in dew.

With her thighs, she squeezed his waist. With her fingers, she rubbed his shoulders. She felt the deep rumble in his chest vibrating against her stomach. There was no purpose in their coming together tonight, no pressure to get her with a child.

Just like his kiss, their lovemaking owned itself. It was a pleasure simply for the sake of pleasure. It was giving and receiving in equal

measure. It was what it should have been all along, and she suspected that for him, it was what it had always been: generous gifting of passion.

His mouth whispered a path to her other breast, giving it the same ministrations as it had the other. She lifted her hips, imploring him to hurry, but he would not be swayed from his quest to reexplore all that he had once known.

Ansley, you are driving me to madness.

He chuckled low… good…

Lower he went, kissing her intimately. A swirling of his tongue, a tug on her sensitive flesh. She whimpered, moaned, dug her fingers into his arms. She wanted to fly, but not without him.

Every touch ignited sensation, and she was soon writhing beneath him, crying out for him, urging him nearer.

Rising above her, powerful and decided, he plunged into her and went still. A soft moan from him, a deep sigh from her.

It had been so long, and yet everything was so familiar, as though they were two pieces of a puzzle that had been

misplaced and were suddenly found and snapped back together. This was where she belonged, she realized. Beneath him, beside him, near his heart.

I love you, Jannie, he said- like in a raw voice before returning his mouth to hers.

As his body rocked against hers, as the passion built into a fervor, he kissed her hungrily. Each powerful thrust carried her higher. His kisses elevated her even higher than that.

Until there was nothing except the sensations, nothing beyond them. Just

them. Moving in a fluid, familiar rhythm, his mouth latched to hers.

When the crescendo came, he captured her screams and she swallowed his groans.

Afterward, she lay snuggled against his side. I like when you kiss me during ...

I like it when I kiss you. I enjoy kissing very much. Even when it is not ...during ...

Laughing, she rubbed his chest. you told me on the terrace that long-ago night that a kiss need not be the start of anything, that it owns itself. Lifting

herself up, she met and held his gaze. I think the kiss that night was the start of us, Ansley. You woke things in me that had long been asleep. then why forbid me from kissing you?

Because it terrified me. What you made me feel. I thought if you did not kiss me, I would keep my distance from you. But each moment with you only drew me nearer. The feelings I have for you still terrify me. They are so grand, so intense.

Um- that is good because the love I have for you terrifies me as well. I have never loved anyone, Jannie, not like

this. There is nothing I will not do for you; will you kiss me again? I shall always kiss you again. And he did.

Epilogue-

Grant wood Manor-

He had looked at her nude body, for sex, with a young woman that was half his age popping her open, and its side in here, and she come-end hard to him, loving him more then she would have ever thought, kissing like made. His gaze warmed her. She had been contenting with what she had because she had never known anything grander. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he leaned in to kiss her.

Not brief this time. They had no audience. His mouth moved over hers with a promise for passion, a vow for pleasure.

I arched against him when he moved to my other breast. Two fingers worked inside me, a little tight but nothing I could not handle. Not so long as he kept his mouth on me, lavishing my breasts with attention. His thumb rubbed around a sweet spot and my eyes rolled back into my head.

So, close. The strength of what was building was staggering. Mind-blowing. My body was going to be blown to dust, atoms when this hit. If he

stopped, I would cry. Cry, and beg. And kill... I came, groaning, every muscle is drawn taut. It was too much.

… right there- AAAAHHHHA!

7

His heir. He had his heir. More, he had his son. And Jannie. He had Jannie. The bedding was changed. She slipped into a fresh nightdress. Then she sat in bed and held the baby. She had been so weary that she thought she would at once fall asleep and not wake up for days. But suddenly she had a burst of energy and excitement and she wondered if she would ever sleep again.

Leaning down, he kissed her brow. thank you. Thank you sincerely.

It would have tormented him to know that his child would not be entitled to his rightful legacy. Blood did matter, and this boy had Ansley's blood pumping through him. One day he would be the King of Ansley. But for now, he was the Marquees of Belle Haven.

Jannie could see it was with a great deal of reluctance that Ansley left so the physician could finish tending to her. The babe was bathed, then so was she.

As the door opened, she glanced over to see her husband prowling toward her. Her husband. Why had she ever resisted the inevitable? She loved him, knew beyond a doubt that he loved her. She could see the depth of his feelings in his eyes.

He drew back and she saw within the green depths of his eyes that even now he still found her desirable.

I suppose we shall have to delay the wedding trip, he said with a wicked smile.

At least a month; decide where you want to go…

Blackmore, she answered without giving him time to finish.

Blackmore, it shall be.

His gaze shifted to their son then. Their son. She could not fathom what it would have cost him to give up the child, to not acknowledge it. His depth of love, even for a friend, knew no bounds. He was quite simply the most remarkable man she had ever known. And he was hers. As was his child. he is so beautiful, she whispered. as beautiful as his mother.

She glanced up at him, wanting to judge his reaction to her next words. I should like to call him Zakaria. Zakaria

Augustus Demure. If that is all right with you. I like it very much.

She saw the honesty of his response in his eyes. He would never be dishonest with her.

Zakaria's eyes blinked open, and his little brow furrowed, his mouth puckered. Ansley leaned in. He has your eyes. A deep, deep blue, for now, the color could change. It often does with babes. was it excruciatingly awful? It certainly sounded as though it was.

At the time, but the memory is already fading. And it was very much worth it to hold this little one in my arms.

Thank you, Ansley; you're welcome, my duchess.

Only Ansley stood his ground, still holding Jannie's hand. You are stuck with me now.

So, he was there, by Jannie's side, when his son made his entrance into the world, squalling at the top of his lungs, a thick thatch of black hair covering his head.

The tears scalded Ansley's eyes and he blinked them back. It was done His heart hammered out an unsteady tattoo. He felt the same sort of exhilaration he experienced during a

hunt' only it was grander, more humbling. He was swirling through a riot of emotions: joy, worry, the weight of burdens, the lightness of bliss.

I will. He smiled, brushed his hair off her brow. as soon as' now. Before the babe is born.

He glanced at her stomach, at the physician, at the midwife, at his mother, who merely nodded.

Releasing a strangled groan, Jannie squeezed his hand. please. I want him to carry your name. I want him to be yours. Or her. I do not care if it is a girl or

a boy. I just want there to be no doubt that it is yours.

That I am yours. That we are yours. right. Mother, get Lenny and send a servant for the clergyman. Hurry. yes, of course. His mother dashed from the room with all the vigor of a girl a third her age.

With all due respect, Your Grace, you will need a special license, Dr. Alberts said.

I have it.

Jannie smiled at him then. I knew you would. You never leave anything to chance.

Not when it comes to you, Jannie Demure. Kneeling beside the bed, Ansley pressed a kiss to her hand. still, you could not have decided this a bit sooner.

Guilt. It’s a bloody awful' Oh, oh, oh! She gripped his hand so tightly that he almost yelled as well.

As her scream once more echoed through the hallways, Ansley gripped the mantel to prevent himself from slamming his fist into it. What if he lost her?

Lost her? he thought. What a fool he was. He never had her.

something must be wrong, he said, gazing at the open door. Why wasn't

his mother bringing him the news? Didn't she realize he had sent for her so she would keep him informed?

Women died giving birth. He could not imagine the world without Jannie in it. Even if she no longer lived here after the babe was born, at least she existed elsewhere. That would be enough. Just to know she was somewhere.

Happy. Walking through fields with her child in tow.

Surely a dark-haired child, with her blue eyes.

He heard the patter of running feet and was halfway across the library

when Lily dashed through the doorway. She gave a quick curtsy. your Grace, her ladyship is calling for you.

What is the deuce wrong? He was in the hallway before he had finished asking the question, racing through the manor, up the stairs. He burst through the door into his bedchamber. Jannie was still abed, a mound visible beneath the sheets.

She was bathed in sweat, gasping. She held out her hand to him. Ansley, I am so sorry.

Rushing over, he took it, squeezed it, touched her brow. He would

willingly die to take this suffering from her.

Jannie…

I was wrong, so terribly, terribly wrong. I hurt you. I know I did.

It does not matter. I will stand by you and the child. Just get this matter, this birth, over with. Be done with it. I will, but first, marry me.

Stunned by her words, the last he had expected, he stared at her- pardon? Marry me.

I am supposed to ask you.

you have already asked ...and I said no. Such a silly thing to do. I fell in love with you at Blackmon. Welford knew. I struggled with guilt. Then when he died, I thought I did not deserve happiness. I did not deserve you.

Jannie, sweetheart, I do not know anyone who deserves happiness more than you. Marry me then.

Leaning up, he brushed his lips over hers. I love you, Jannie Demure, future Duchess of Ansley, with all my heart and soul. will I be enough for you?

You have been enough for me for a good ten months now, and a good part

of that time was without all the benefits I shall enjoy as your husband. Fifty years should be no trouble at all. do I look too awful ...for my wedding?

Her face was damp, her hair plastered to her head. She appeared so incredibly tired. To say she looked awful would be a kindness because it was much worse. To me, you are always beautiful.

A commotion at the door drew his attention. His mother, Lenny, and the clergyman entered the room. you would best make this quick, the physician said.

The babe's here.

It was quick. They exchanged vows, and when it came time for a ring, his mother pressed one against his palm.

Your father gave it to me on the day we married, she said, with tears in her eyes. It was always to be yours when you found your duchess. And she no longer had a need for it.

Ansley slipped it onto Jannie's finger. with this ring, I thee wed. I pronounce you man and we' Jannie screamed.

Out, the physician ordered. all the men are to leave this instant!

The clergyman finished the words to the ceremony as he was scrambling for the door, Lenny following quickly on his heels.

She could not, but she did not resist when he pulled her to the water's edge.

Come into the water and I will rub your back and finger your little sweet slit. on, you do not half tempt me.

He drew her into the curve of his body. what would It take to tempt you all the way? She stared up at him. how can you want me?

how can I not? You are the mother of my child, the center of my heart.

Before she could comment, as though expecting her refutation, he was guiding her toward the steps. Her bare toes touched the water first, and she nearly groaned with the thought of how wonderful it would be to completely submerge herself in the warmth. As she went deeper into the water, her nightdress billowed out around her, then sucked in close to her body.

The water was lapping at her breasts when Ansley began to lift her

hem. You said I could still be clothed, she chastised him.

I cannot see anything, and you will be more comfortable if you shed weight.

She did not argue. The shadows in the water did prevent him from getting a good look at how cumbersome she had become. Once she was divested of her nightdress, he moved around behind her and began to gently knead her back.

On, that is nice, she said, settling her head into the crook of his shoulder. There is something about the water that’s very healing. Slowly, he turned her

around and lowered his mouth to hers while his hands continued to roam over her. Everywhere. Everywhere.

-And-

She returned the favor, skimming her fingers over him, wrapping them around him. He groaned low. on, you wicked girl.

How is it that you make me so comfortable with all this? because nothing between us should be forbidden.

Reaching up, she kissed him. She wanted him as she had never wanted anything. She wanted' on. Oh. She

pressed a hand to her side while pain swept through her.

He backed away. what is it? I am not sure. I think ...I think I should return to the house. why?

It is time, Ansley. The baby. It is time.

He grabbed her hand. Jannie, marry me. Now. I will send it to the clergyman. Ansley, I cannot.

Not like this.

He studied her for all a heartbeat, and she felt something shift between them. Something unwanted. Regretfully,

she realized that she finally carried out what she had so long ago desired: to hurt him beyond imagining. But rather than solace, it yielded only pain.

He helped her out of the pool, but no warmth went with his touch. She found herself grieving once again.

Every time Jannie screamed, Ansley downed a glass of whiskey. It was not fair that he had the means to dull his pain while she did not. What she had felt in the pool was only the beginning. It took another day before her labor began in earnest. He would at once be sent for the physician and his mother. He did not

know why he thought she needed to be there. Lenny now sat with him in the library to wait.

Ansley was not even certain why he remained. He had given everything to Jannie. Everything. And it had not been enough.

So, she was surprised one night when she awoke to find herself alone. She stroked her hand over the indentation where he had been sleeping. The sheet was cool to her touch. He had been gone a while, then.

She rolled out of bed, stretched to one side, then the other. Oh, her back

was hurting. She needed Ansley to rub it. Strange, how she knew she had but to ask and he would comply. He gave her so much attention, more than she had had in her entire life. It was as though he lived for moments with her.

She padded out of the room and into the hallway. The door to his bedchamber was open, but he was not there. He had grown hungry and was enjoying a late-night repast. But when she went to the kitchen, she found it empty. Then she remembered him saying that he often swam at night.

The grass was cool beneath her feet as she made her way to the building at the far side of the garden. She could barely believe that August was already here. The Season would be ending. She wondered who had become betrothed. It had been so long since she was in Rockville to enjoy the season that she did not even miss it. It is much better to spend the warmer months here, where the air is so fresh, and she could move about so easily.

When she reached her destination, she hesitated. Would he dislike being disturbed? Or would you be welcome here? Welcome her, no doubt.

Opening the door, she stepped through it. The sultry warmth greeted her, coating her in dew. The light from lanterns battled the shadows, causing them to dance mysteriously between the walls. She stood there, watching his powerful muscles bunching and stretching as he sliced through the water. He was quite simply beautiful.

While she would be content whether this child was a girl or a boy, suddenly she very much wanted to have a child that resembled Ansley. Something in her heart twisted and turned. She had been so afraid to acknowledge her

feelings for this man. They filled her with guilt. They had ever since Blackmon.

She had told herself that he called to only the physical in her, but they had been remarkably chaste since coming here, and still, he stirred within her dreams that she had long denied herself. He reached the edge of the pool, turned-

-And-

Stopped, his gaze falling on her. He breathed heavily, the water lapping at his chest. Flicking his hair back, he began plowing through the water, walking toward her. interested in a midnight swim?

She laughed. no, I just woke up and you were gone. I do not know. My back was hurting. I just ...wanted to find you.

God, she was rambling. Whatever was wrong with her? Come. Get in the water. no, I ...I do not think it would be wise in my condition.

He started up the steps. Her eyes widened at the sight of him. on, me. She turned away.

You have seen me without clothes before, he said, and she heard the humor laced in his voice. Yes, but it has

been a while. He wore trousers to bed. At least here. With her. He took her hand. join me in the pool, Jannie. I really don't think' good. I do not want you to think. I just want you to feel.

She laughed. Ansley, you must stop interrupting me. you can even keep your nightdress on. it will weigh me down. then take it off.

Her screams sounded through the residence. Why did he have to feel them in the core of his being? Why couldn't he just ignore them?

Why is it taking so damned long? he asked.

it is the way of it, my friend, Lenny replied. I must confess to being extremist grateful that I.

You do not have to listen to your mother going through this. she is happy with you, Lenny. I am grateful for that.

And that you made an honest girl of hers.

I would have long ago, but ...past loves, like mange, are sometimes hard to get rid of. Despite the circumstances, Ansley smiled.

I would have thought you would be married to Jannie by now, Lenny said. It is not my choice that I am not. He

wanted to claim this child as his with a furiousness that astounded him. But she wanted him to walk away, to honor a ridiculous agreement. He wanted the girl and the child' both as his. Openly, publicly. Mourning is damned. Etiquette be'

~*~

Be honest here, Jannie. Your unquestionable loyalty will prevent you from ever taking a lover; then why would you even suggest'; because there would be no guilt, and how, pray do tell, did you deduce that utter nonsense?

Because you do not fancy him at all, so-o it would not be as though you were truly betraying me; you have gone daft. She headed for the door' Jannie? Please, do not go. Please, hear me out.

Stopping, she glanced over her shoulder to see his arm extended, his hand reaching for her in the shadows of the night. She could win any argument with him by simply leaving the room. It was not fair to him, and so they never argued. But this? This was preposterous.

Please, Jannie.

His voice was rough with his need for her to still be. Unfair. Unfair of him to

compel her to stay, knowing guilt would eat at her if she walked away when he could not.

She was trembling with anger and disgust at his suggestion regarding Ansley, yet still, she cautiously made her way back to Welford. She clambered onto the bed, took his hand, and held it in her lap, her legs tucked beneath her. She refused to look at him, and instead studied the silhouette of their joined hands.

The fact that you think so little of him is what makes my plan so brilliant, he said quietly. it is not as though you will be

truly betraying me. Your heart will still be mine.

Ansley has a reputation for being a marvelous lover', he began.

I am aware of that. He is all the women talk of, so-o, he can make it pleasant for you. He squeezed her hand. you deserve that at least.

All of Rockville will know it is not your child. That you have been cuckolded.

He will carry Demure blood. As I told Ansley, it will be close enough.

Her mouth tingled. She thought she was going to be ill. Have you already

discussed this madness with him? I had to know he was agreeable.

Of course, he would be agreeable. It is a skirt to lift.

His low chuckle took her by surprise. He was not so in favor of it as I had expected. He did not think you would welcome him. I will not.

Jannie, you have been a devoted wife. Why should you not have this?

She was grateful for the dark, that he could not see the blush warming her cheeks or the tears filling her eyes.

He can give you what I cannot, he said softly. You are a young girl who has had to lock all her dreams in a musty old trunk, because of your husband's poor judgment.

In a friend. A friend to whom you would now give me. It is revolting.

He did not force the drink down my throat. I went willingly into the curricle, encouraged the horses to go faster'

She brought his hand to her lips, pressed a kiss to the backs of his fingers, knowing he would feel the dampness

coating her cheeks, the tears gathering at the corners of her mouth. Am, Jannie.

He wrapped his hand around the nape of her neck and drew her down until her face was buried in the nook of his shoulder.

Do not ask me, she rasped.

I will not force you. Neither will he but know that I will understand if you change your mind. You deserve a child. You deserve a man who will not only put your pleasure above his but will ensure that your enjoyment far exceeds his.

Not Ansley. Never Ansley. Sinners would have a need for overcoats

in hell before she would willingly give herself to the man, she despised more than any other.

8

Jannie slipped out of her husband's bed near dawn, leaving him in the company of his snores. She had not slept well. Guilt had reared its ugly head, guilt that she had lost his heir. Not that she knew for certain that the babe had been a boy. But in her heart, she could not help but think that he had been. Losing the child had been like losing a piece of her soul. And when the full extent

of Welford's injuries had been made clear, all their dreams went astray.

'Oh, Goddess.' He murmured under her breath sending up prayer after prayer. The streets were full of people. The air was strangled with shouting, with crying. Prayers and pleas were being sent up to the Gods. Curses to the Gods. Despair and Panic ran deep in the air. The air shoaled of despair panic and loss.

'Put your veil on.' She scooted his horse closer to her own, helping her to hide all her black hair and most of her face. She ripped his shirt putting it to his nose. He did the same, the smoke was

thick with the stench of burning hair and flesh. It made her stomach roll and try to rebel.

The sound of crumbling timber ripped over the roar of people startling His's horse. She barely noticed She take hold of her reigns. She did not notice anything beyond the house before her crumbling in on itself. floor after floor until it hit the ground with a cracking thump. More people screamed around them.

'She...' He licked her lips; they were too dry. She felt as if she were

baking 'What do we do? We can't do anything.'

She said nothing, just handed her back her reigns. His mouth opens as a shrill scream ripped through the air.

'HELP!' a dark figure ran from the smoke out of a burning house. 'Klever! Klever!' The words, a name, were said in a frantic voice.

'His!' She called after her. He was off her horse and running toward the small figure. She was taller than him but could not be so much older. It did not matter, His took one look at the woman's

desperate brown eyes and burned clothes and knew she had to help.

He came closer, slowly. The woman already shoaled of smoke and fear, like everything else. 'Can I help?'

'My son!'

His heart sank. Do not let the boy still be in that house, do not let him be in these mad streets. There would be no telling how many people were trampled in this chaos.

'I thought- he ran out. He's still-' her eyes widen and looked up at the same moment two hands rested on His's shoulders. Then they were gone, and a

tall figure was running into the blazes that were reducing the house before them into less than a kindle. She opened her mouth for She to bring his ass back to her side, but she knew he would not listen even if he could have heard her.

With her heart hammering in her throat for She's safety she turned to the frantic woman. 'What is your name?' He grabbed the woman’s hand pulling her towards the horses and out of the street's main chaos.

'Flora.' She would not take her eyes off the house.

Neither could Him but she had to ask, had to know. 'How did this happen?' It was more asked to herself, but Flora spoke.

'The Unrest caused it.' Flora ducked her head away, her eyes darting frantically towards the house and back to His. He is muscled bunched, she was dead weary, but she would stop this woman before she got herself killed.

'We aren't to speak of it.' Her voice got lower. 'It's treason but- there are sad things working here.'

'Such as?' He could hardly breathe. 'What sad things? Tell me, please?'

'The King has abandoned the throne and betrayed the Gods; our Lady has left ran off with a lover' Her body trembled. 'There is talk that the Gods…'

He did not like the sound of this anymore. She had to know more. 'The Gods are a part of this?'

'They are angry with Mystery; they will forsake us until we accept the new-'

'New!' new what? King? Surely not. 'Who?'

'I know not.' Flora would not meet her eye. Of course, she knew.

He looked around at all the screaming people. Not a single eye was dry, the smoke was working. Her own eyes were blurring with the stuff. That moment of wiping her eyes cost her. Flora moved and He was a moment behind her. A tightly coiled spring, tackling the racing mother to the ground. They rolled in the dirt. The mother let out a heart-breaking moan. He is heart was breaking for the woman but when she spoke her voice was one of steel.

'Don't be stupid.' His hissed at the whimpering woman. 'Run for that house again and I will bind you to my horse.'

'But...' the words died on Flora's lips. He was not joking. She was worried too. He had not come out yet, why hadn't she come back?

He had not been sleeping well on the road he refused to do more than take a quick nap and that was only when He bullied him. He had been pushing it to reach Median, but still. He should have been out by now.

The house on the other side of the one She rushed into caved. Floor by floor it stacked in on the next. Flora cried out but did not move.

He could not take it. There had to be a way to stop all this. Stop Median from burning, this was her home now. Desperate His sought deep for her magic. She swore when she needed it, she would be able to use it. That it would return to her eventually. She needed it. There was not a promise she would not make the Gods not to stop all of this.

Inside she recoiled. Do not promise that. Never promise something to

a God, they might just take you up on your word. If you were unfortunate, they would bind you to it. Gods are fickle and mortals are seen as expendable.

Still, He dug into herself, searching for a long-lost old friend. It was there, deep down but it ran through her. When she found it, they embraced in the furthest reaches of her mind, a place she would have never gone unless she was truly desperate. If she had not truly been looking for it, her magic would have stayed out of her reach for a while longer. Now that she had it back, washing over her, caressing her heart with the truth. It

was so faint, but it could be enough. He dared to hope.

She had no magic over elements. She was not a fool to think she could put this out with her own magic, she was not that strong. A whole troop of mages could put out the blazes of a city. Not one woman with truth-teller magic.

Around her and in her head the chaos reign. He pushed it away, she had to be calm. Clear in the head. She was not a great Mage like Mican, her brother of the law, but she was a Truth Teller.

He bit her lip. It had worked miracles before, it could work again. His

open her mouth, she was about to find out.

'A Great Fire is blazing in Median, my city.' her nose tickled with the truth. Her home was on fire. Blowing out a breath His continued. 'It shall die away ...now.'

A great gust of wind brought Him to her knees on top of Flora who was still sobbing. His shielded her against the roaring winds wishing the screaming around her was just a bad dream. It had not worked, the wind was going to blow the fire even further, out of the city limits

and now He did not even have her magic to protect her.

She had not felt it at first, not until she was lying on the ground over Flora gasping for a clean breath. She felt the ripping tearing through her gut and up into her chest with sharp hot pricks that had her eyes tearing up. It hurt! Dear Goddess, it hurt!

She had not hurt this badly since the last time she had overextended her magic in Krad.

Thumps echoed around her, pounding into her ears. Plop after plop,

words rang through the air braking through His's haze.

'Goddess bless!' Someone shouted. 'Miracle!' Screamed another. His looked up, the sky was black and gray. Ashen, there was not a tinge of orange glow insight. Not a sight of pink or a spot of red.

There was no crackling to be heard in the dead of the silence taking over the city. A ghost had descended His thought before the roars rang in the air and into her ears.

'Momma!' He flew, onto the ground. 'Momma.' Flora was running toward a slight figure quickly advancing.

'Clever!' Mother and son clashed in an embrace. The child was young, His guess when she saw his feet leave the ground. No more than five winters. He was being rocked back and forth in his mother's arms both were crying. Hysterical yapping told Him there was puppy involved.

'Princess?' she had never been more pleased to hear that voice. 'What are you doing on the ground?'

Enjoying the shill of soot and dirt. He worked her mouth to say but nothing came out. She was too tired. 'I-' she did not have to finish, there were too many voices to be heard through.

'We are being blessed!' cried a man. 'Gods be praised.' they all yelled. He realized that the plopping she had heard was really the sound of bodies falling to their knees.

'Another attack-'

'What happens?' it took His a second to realize that she was being spoken to.

'I- what? 'she asked as he hauled her to her feet. He seemed bemused by the whole thing. Only He knew that really this had scared him shitless.

'His, was this you’re doing?'

His snorted, why would she set Median ablaze?

'Did you put the fire out?' the world spun leaving Him to wish that he had left her on the ground where nothing had been moving.

'I-' She was not sure. He shook her head feeling stupid and muggy headed.

'That must be yes.' She hugged her tighter righting her veil. People around them were moving quickly now. He had a feeling that the temples would be busy tonight. All of them.

She must have been thinking along the same lines. He turned to the mother and son. 'You and yours need to head for the Mother Temple, take all that you need and value.' Looting would be heavy tonight. 'Go.' Flora was already nodding clutching her son who was strangling the puppy.

'Thank-' She waved her off. The three of them ran towards the direction of the temples without a backward glance.

'Now.' He adjusted Him again. 'Let us go.'

'Not to the palace.' He is words were slurred. She had not drunk since the night of her binding, not heavily at least. She should not sound like she was drunk. 'We can't-'

'Yes-' he persisted. 'We ca-'

'No!' He clutched his sleeve. The thought of stepping foot back in those walls tonight made her skin crawl. Something was happening, they needed

to find out exactly what before they barged back into the palace.

She looked down at her fist clutching his sleeve. Couldn't he see how worried she was? Terrified was more like it. 'All right.' he finally gave in. 'Okay, we'll go to the Guild.'

He let out a sigh and slump. She did not remember falling but she knew that She was there to catch her.

But for him to believe that she would welcome into her bed the man responsible- it was beyond the pale. Reviling. Made her sick at heart. She was grateful that she had far too many other

things to occupy her mind today as she prepared for the arrival of her guests. The sooner she got started working on what needed to be done, the sooner she could shove these unsettling thoughts from her mind.

She rang for her house cleaner, Lily. Within the hour, Jannie was dressed in a simple lilac dress so she could move about quickly. At noon, she would change into something more proper for receiving her guests. Once a yearly event, they had not hosted a hunt since the accident. She had feared it would serve as both a distraction from what might have been and a reminder of what had been. But

Welford insisted it was long past time that they begin to socialize once more. Finally embracing the notion, she had lofty expectations for uncharacteristic normalcy for a few days.

An expectation that splattered before her when she strode into the breakfast dining room and saw Ansley already seated at the table. She had assumed he would sleep in, not be up to the sun.

Ansley at once set aside his teacup and rose to his feet- lady Welford.

…Your Grace. I hope you are well; your hopes do not concern me, your elegance.

She thought she noticed a tautening in his jaw. She was not usually a termagant, but for him, she was more than willing to make an exception.

Allow me to express my appreciation for the lovely accommodation, he said laconically.

It seemed they would spar with words this morning.

Already she was weary of it.

Welford would be upset with her if he knew she had given his exalted guest the smallest bedchamber in the farthest corner of the manor. As a King, he should have been given a suite of rooms. She suddenly, against her will, felt petty. we have so many guests arriving' no need to explain. I enjoy overlooking the stables.

She wanted the subject changed before she offered him a more accommodating room. I had not expected you to be about so early. I thought I might be of service.

Had she been eating she would have choked. here? Now? Your arrogant

cad! To think that I would accept anything at all from you, but especially-'

My help with the hounds? He interrupted. yes, of course. Forgive me. I am sure your huntsman is quite up to the task of seeing that all is ready tomorrow for the hunt.

She went light-headed and chilled, aware of all the blood draining from her face. He had been offering to help her prepare for her guests. That was the service to which he alluded. Not bedding her, not getting her with the child. Welford had put these silly notions

into her head, and she seemed unable to rid herself of them.

Yes, he is. Quiet. She hated that her voice sounded unsteady, that she was unnerved by what she had interpreted him to be saying. She swept over to the sideboard, striving to stop the trembling in her hands as she selected ham, eggs, and a muffin for her plate.

Drat, it! He was waiting to aid her with her chair when she turned around. At least he had the grace to put her at the end of the table farthest from where he was seated. He had not taken

the head of the table, but rather, a chair along the side.

I want nothing from you, she whispered as she took the chair he offered.

He leaned in, filling her nostrils with his rich, tangy scent of bergamot and clove. then nothing you shall have, he said, his voice low, sensually belying the words he had spoken, indicating instead that she would have it all. Everything.

~*~

The man was indeed an expert at seduction, but she would not be seduced. She and Ansley sat without speaking for

several interminable minutes, the only sound the scraping of silver over china.

Finally, she dared to peer up at him, only to find his gaze homed in on her as he slowly chewed. He was as handsome as the devil, too beautiful, really. He had one imperfection, and it was presently not visible to her. A scar on his jaw. The wound had still been bleeding when he came to tell her there had been an accident and Welford was horribly injured. Ansley had reeked of excesses and indulgences ...and the coppery scent of blood. Her husband's blood had stained his torn and rumpled clothing.

Ansley had looked scared that night. And young. It was easy to forget that he was only a little older than her. He had always seemed so mature, in control. Many thought he was the oldest of the three brothers, but in fact, he was the youngest. The night she first met him, she was struck by his stylishness and confidence. She knew of his reputation, of course.

Women swooned at his feet. Of late there seemed to be an inordinate abundance of unmarried women, as women refrained from accepting offers of marriage on the off chance that Ansley would honor one of them by asking for

her hand. With his thick black hair and startling green eyes, he was a god among mere mortals. Jannie despised him with every breath of her being.

His Grace took the marquees fishing. He tested his fishing line before testing other waters. You mentioned your ridiculous notion to Jannie.

He saw no need to further clarify. Only one ridiculous notion had been spouted since his arrival. In truth, it was the only ridiculous notion he could recall that Welford had ever had. When only silence greeted his words, Ansley gazed back at him once again.

Welford gave a hapless shrug that unbalanced him. He started to list to one side, released his hold on his pole to straighten himself.

Ansley looked back at the water, giving his friend the opportunity to grapple with his gracelessness in private. His first inclination was to rush over to assist him, but he knew Welford would resent the interference, the implication that he could not attend to his own needs even if, in many areas, he could not. Like himself, his friend was a proud man, too proud for his own good. He did not want to consider what it had cost Welford to ask him to get his wife with child. He was

not certain he would be willing to pay the price, no matter how much he loved the girl.

You had the right to it," Welford eventually said, sounding winded, as though he had run a great distance. she was none too happy with me. Afraid that leaves it up to you, old chum.

Ansley swung around. pardon?

You will need to charm her, wear down her resistance to the idea.

You have gone mad. His voice held a biting edge. Welford might find all this amusing; Ansley did not. He remembered the chill that entered the

breakfast room with her. But more, he remembered the tantalizing scent of her as he aided her with her chair. Jasmine. Exotic. Enticing. Her flawless skin beguiled him.

He had been so tempted to slide a finger along the column of her throat. He had wanted to kiss away the firm set of her lips. The last thing he wanted was for Welford to grant him permission to seduce his wife. He suspected Welford had no clue regarding how much Ansley would enjoy doing so. Welford might view it all as an uncomplicated transaction, but Ansley viewed it as a quick journey directly into hell.

No matter how short a term he spent with any girl, he shared not only the physical but the emotional as well. Warmth, caring, concern, enjoyment. The love he held in reserve. He was not certain he could withhold that elusive emotion from Jannie. She struck him as a girl who would demand all' even if she came to him expecting naught but his seed. Time with her would not be simple. Complications abounded. He was certain of it.

You are on the verge of having a hundred guests, he said now, and you wish me to flirt with your wife?

Not openly. I am not daft. But surely you can arrange moments alone with her. You have done it with other women.

Your wife is no other woman. He was surprised by the roughness in his voice. He turned his attention back to the stream. Leaves were drifting to the ground on the slight breeze. Those killed by the advance of winter. He wondered if Jannie's frigid mien toward him would kill him. Quite possibly.

Pity both your brothers are married, Welford said. I doubt either of them would lack the courage'

Courage has nothing to do with it! Ansley snapped. Although it did. He feared he could easily

lose his heart. But he could not confess that to Welford. It is simply a bad idea on so many levels, and I believe you and I have already reached our quota for bad ideas.

I did have a jolly enjoyable time of it that night, Ansley. Until the end, of course. How are my jewels?

His pet name for the girls he loved. Glancing back, Ansley met his friend's gaze. well taken care of.

I've thought about telling Jannie.'

Good God, I cannot remember the last time I felt such ...freedom, Welford announced.

Standing along the bank of the stream, Ansley glanced over at Welford. With his back against the tree where he sat, and a pole held loosely between his hands, he appeared to be at peace. Since the accident, whenever Ansley visited his friend, they had stayed in Welford's library, drinking, conversing, lamenting their poor choices.

Like Ansley, Welford was an outdoors person at heart. Ansley had been decided that their visit would go differently this time. It helped immensely that Jannie had been occupied preparing for the arrival of guests and attending to last-minute details. Ansley knew she would not have approved of his plans. From what he would say, she was too protective of Welford, coddled him.

Suddenly, Ansley wondered if part of Welford's desire to give his wife a child rested with his need to divert much of her attention away from him, to give her something else to worry over.

A child would certainly carry out that. Although most children of the nobility were tended to by nannies and child caretakers, Ansley could not see Jannie relinquishing the reins for any great length of time. She would be involved with the child. It was her nature to protect, to nurture, to ease the way. She would no doubt keep the little pup far away from him' whether he was the father. He wondered who was second on Welford's diabolical list.

He remembered her bright red cheeks during breakfast. He was accustomed to her giving him a cold shoulder, always just shy of a cut direct.

But this morning she had been skittish, more uncomfortable with him than usual. For a moment, when she saw him sitting at the table, it looked as though she intended to march from the room. His accommodations were deplorable. That much he had anticipated. But her gaze flicking over him and not settling with a glare was unexpected.

9

Setting down her napkin, she pushed back her chair and rose. We are quite different, you and me. We do not suit at all. I would trade places with him in an instant to spare him all he suffers

now' even though I did not cause the suffering that is visited upon him.

He wiped his mouth with his napkin, elegance in his motions, tempered with masculinity. His large hands held power. His sensual mouth as well.

She could imagine him skillfully using both to elicit pleasure. He seemed to hesitate before saying, Wilford appears ... frailer since I last saw him.

He is limited to two activities. Sitting and lying. Neither of which is continually active. His muscles atrophy. I fear soon nothing will be left of him. She bit the inside of her cheek. She had not

meant to reveal the last, to give him even a hint of her vulnerability.

It terrified her to think of a life without Welford. Even as he was, she decided, was better than not having him at all. She shored up her resolve, decided to hurt this man who had destroyed so much. tell me, Your Grace, does the guilt ever hammer at you enough that you would wish to trade places with him? I would give my soul that he was not crippled. But I must confess to being far too selfish to wish to trade places with him.

Ansley flinched, the lash of her words hitting home. As she turned and swept from the room, she wondered why she found no satisfaction in the triumph.

Four hours later, Jannie cursed herself for her stubbornness, for not accepting Ansley's offer to help. She had forgotten how much was involved in preparing for the hunt and the arrival of guests. Sixty invitations had been sent out. Fifty-eight had been accepted.

Including spouses, unmarried sons, and daughters, more than a hundred people would soon descend upon her quiet country home. It had been so

long, so exceptionally long since they had entertained to this size. An occasional guest for dinner, a relation or two, but not a flock of the curious. In equal measure, she dreaded and welcomed the coming days.

Hence the reason Welford had declared that it was past time for a hunt' even though he'd not be able to take part in what was once his fondest sport. I shall enjoy listening to the baying of the hounds once again, he had said.

She made her way up the stairs to her husband's bedchamber, hoping he had been roused already. It took so

long for Randall to prepare him for the day. Welford had lost far too much control over his bodily functions. Four times a year Randall took him to the spa at Harrogate to heal waters.

Although Jannie had always wanted to go with him, Welford asked her not to' fearful she would be embarrassed by his limitations. It hurt her that he would think so poorly of her. But she brushed her tender feelings aside because his challenges were so much more difficult to face.

It was only recently' when his physician introduced him to a contraption

known as a catheter' that Welford had begun to regain his confidence and felt any comfort in being around others. He was now spared public embarrassment over what he could no longer control. Such a proud man he was.

She admired his optimistic outlook; he never seemed to pity himself. She hoped the entertainments and country party she'd arranged would please him and bring him boundless joy' and that none of their guests would stare at him with questioning eyes. How bad is it really, Welford?

Her heart would break for him if all did not go well.

Randall shot to his feet and bowed. My girl- forgive me. His lordship gave me leave to read one of his books. I thought this one might suffice, and sat for only a moment'

I do not give a fig where you sit and read. Where is his lordship?

He looked decidedly uncomfortable, as though he knew she would not be pleased with his answer. She was not.

To her surprise, he was not in his bedchamber. The library, then. Ready and

eager to greet those who would soon be arriving. To her consternation, however, the library was empty of his presence as well. Although Randall was sitting in a chair reading.

Where is his lordship? Jannie demanded.

10

She grabbed his hair, yanked, and pulled him closer as he had told her to do. He thrust one finger inside her, crooking it and hitting her in the spot that turned her moans into one long, high-pitched orgasm. She shuddered against him, her legs quaking, and when he

finally slowed to look up at her, he saw her hair was a wild tumble, and her face was glowing. At first, he made no motion. His sex was quivering, and he was tormented with desire… Marianne grew desperate.

She pushed his hand away, took his sex into her mouth again, and with her two hands, she encircled his sexual parts, caressed him, and absorbed him until he came. He leaned over with gratitude, tenderness, and murmured, 'You are the first woman, the first woman, the first girl…' When she saw that he was dissolved with pleasure, she stopped, divining that perhaps if she deprived him

now, he might make a gesture towards fulfillment. He drove his tongue inside her, setting off another shattering moan that was music to his ears.

She was quite an instrument to play, so finely tuned, and if he touched her right, she made the most glorious sounds, raw, intense, delicious noises of pleasure as he plundered her with his tongue. Then his hands came to life. He went as if to rub his wrists, then he reached for the blindfold, his fingers dancing right in front of it without touching it, and then he reached out for me.

I jumped… some- He caught me by the arms, wrapping his fingers all the way around them and bringing me forward. And then he realized I was naked, and he felt my sides and my breasts, giving a little startled noise. Besides, before I could stop him, he had pulled me to him, forcing me against his chest.

His adulthood was thumping against my sex, and he kissed me in that shocking way, and I realized he had lifted me off my feet. 'You are mine,' he grunts out, pumping into me, the length and level of his arousal brutal. 'Mine,' he swears, as he releases my mouth and

turns me around, pushing me forward as he yanks my legs back, one hand hard on my back, the other gripping my ass.

He does not slow the movement, giving me full, hard thrusts, my breasts bouncing from the top of my dress, the mirror above the sink giving me a full view of my sweet young girl, in worn dress, light hair mussed, mouth open, intensity over his face. His reflection pulls at my hair, tilting my head back, and I find his eyes on mine in the mirror.

11

I fear she is not at home, Your Grace, the butler said.

Ansley stilled. not at home to me, you mean. I will see her if I must find her myself.

The butler cleared his throat. she left for Herndon

Hall this afternoon.

With a sound curse, Ansley headed out the door.

The carriage had come to a halt sometime earlier. Jannie did not know the exact hour. She knew only that darkness had fallen, rain poured down, and a footman stood ready with an umbrella should she decide to disembark. She sent her house cleaner in as soon as they

arrived. Yet despite the dampness and chill seeping into her bones, she could not bring herself to leave the confines of the carriage.

The door clicked open. She did not know why she was not surprised to see Ansley climb inside and take the bench opposite her.

What the bloody hell are you doing, Jannie? How did you know I was here?

I made a call at your residence. Fairly killed my horse to catch up to you. Did you think I would let you run off without coming after you?

I was not running off. I' She had been running away. She looked out the window toward the residence. I cannot bring myself to go in. It was not as difficult in Rockville because we had not been there in so long, not since the accident. But here, for more than three years, it was everything. And everything was a lie. Jannie'

I had to leave Rockville, Ansley. I feel as though I am suffocating there. You, your mother, the woman, Cousin Green' I have no peace. I cannot think, I cannot breathe. I know so many people mean well. She released a wry laugh. some do not. I thought if I came here, I

could at least breathe. But I can ‘t leaves the carriage. I do not know what I was thinking.

It was not my intent to suffocate you, Jannie. But I promised Welford that I would ...care for you. Come to Grant wood Manor, Jannie. You will be away from the madness that is Rockville. You can heal in spirit. Give birth to your child. Return here when you are ready.

She felt the tears sting her eyes. He was not going to pressure her to marry him. It was both a relief and a disappointment. yes. I think I should like that very much.

It was late when they arrived at Grant wood Manor the following night. Here the only black crepe to be seen was what she wore. Here the clocks tick tucked. She felt a lifting of her spirits that astounded her. She had not realized how much she needed to get away from the oppressiveness of both the Rockville residence and Herndon Hall.

Ansley had been the perfect man on the journey here. He had regaled her with tales of his youth, the history of his ancestors. They had spoken of nothing intimate. Yet there was a sense of intimacy. It was simply his way' with his silken voice and his gaze never straying

from her. She told herself it was because he was always in the mode of the seducer. A habit formed during years of frequenting bedchambers. His reputation surpassed that of his brothers. Did he honestly believe he could give it all up for her? Did she?

She wanted to as Ansley led her up the stairs, but then the reality of the situation came crashing around her as he opened the door to the bedchamber beside his. She was certain it had never occurred to him that she would sleep anywhere except within easy reach. I should sleep at the end of the hall, she

said. He shrugged. select whichever room you want.

She did not want the room she had had before. She did not want the room where Welford had slept. To move to another wing would be ludicrous. Strolling down the hallway, she considered every other room. None was as big as the one he offered her. None was as inviting. She would be here until she gave birth.

Her back had begun to ache on the journey, and she had been quite miserable. She reached the end of the hallway, pivoted, and returned to the door

he had first opened for her. I suppose this one shall do. But you are not to use the door between the bedchambers. I would not dream of it. that is a lie. I suspect you were dreaming of it on the way here. a small lie. Is it my fault that I find you irresistible?

He was such a charmer, always knew the right thing to say. She wished she could trust his words. Ansley does not woo me with false flattery. one day, Jannie, I shall convince you that I have never given you false words.

She opened her mouth to remind him' omission is not false words. it is still a falsehood. He shook his head.

Would you care for a late-night repast before bed? he asked.

Yes, thank you.

While the servants hauled up her trunks and put away her belongings, she joined Ansley in the smaller dining room at a table with only four chairs. She sat across from him while the simple fare was laid out before them. She popped a square of cheese into her mouth and followed it with a grape.

I suspect many mothers will be disappointed that you are not in Rockville for the Season, she said.

They would be more disappointed if I were there and not paying attention to their daughters. you might be surprised. Someone might catch your fancy.

He lifted his wineglass. someone already has. As you well know. I am in mourning, she reminded him exasperatingly.

She watched his jaw clench just before he gulped down more wine. I am

aware of that. Just do not expect me to be too jolly about it.

She wanted to change the subject. you and your brothers grew up here, didn't you? Yes. Mother preferred Glenwood Manor to Lyons Place.

Of late, however, we have been gathering for Christmas at Lyons Place. Claire has made it a true home for Westcliffe. your residence already feels like a home. not when I am here alone. It is too blasted quiet.

The prospect of silence was what had driven her away from Rockville and

Herndon Hall. She did not want to be alone with her thoughts.

He had been devoted to her during their month at Blackmon, but then she had given him everything.

They had lived in a bubble, but now the bubble had burst. She had no doubt that in time he would grow weary of her.

Then she would face the challenges of raising her child alone.

Following dinner, Ansley tried to convince her to join him in the library for a bit of reading, but she retired to her room. He went to the library, but rather

than grab a book, he grabbed the bottle of whiskey and headed for the garden.

Trekking beyond the house, beyond the lighted path, he reached an area blanketed in darkness except for the glow of stars and moon. He sat on the grass, opened the whiskey, and took a long draught, relishing the burning and the penetrating warmth.

Jannie was correct, blast her. He had gone into this situation knowing he could never recognize this child. It did not stop him from wanting to nor did it prevents him from wanting her, but his desires were ill-timed. She needed to

heal. This child would be born. Welford would be recorded as its father. Ansley would do all that he could to protect it.

Stretching out on his back on the cool ground, he stared at the stars. Their distance made them more appealing. Jannie said she was suffocating. He brought her here to breathe. By God, he would give her room to breathe.

Sitting by the window in her bedchamber, Jannie did not want to admit that she had enjoyed sharing dinner with Ansley. Even when they did not speak, it was a comfort to have him near. But was that enough?

She nearly leaped out of her skin when he came bursting into the room. Come along. I have something marvelous to show you, he announced. But I am in my bedclothes. It does not matter. There is no one to see.

He ducked into a bedchamber across the hallway and emerged with an arm filled with blankets. His excitement was contagious.

What is it, Ansley? You must see it to believe it.

He led her through the manor. Once outside, he said, grab my arm. Do not let go.

She curled her fingers around his arm and allowed him to lead her through the garden, away from the house, the lights. we should have the torches lit. Nope, they will interfere.

He came to a stop. She watched as his silhouette, limned by moonlight, arranged the blankets on the ground. Then he took her hand, drew her down until she was lying on the blanket, gazing at the stars. She saw one sweeping across

the sky, followed quickly by another, then another.

She released a small laugh. What is happening?

I do not know, but I have seen it before. It is as though the stars are racing across the sky. Do you think we are only allowed one wish? I think you can have as many as you want.

She studied the sky. So many things to wish for. That she would have met Ansley before Welford. But what guarantee did she have that he would be any more faithful? That she had not had a month with Ansley that caused her to

doubt her affections for Welford. But then she would not have a child.

Is it wrong that I am glad to be here? she asked, not certain why the words burst forth.is it wrong that I am glad you are here? It was so much easier talking to the stars.

I was not such a good wife. She had thought saying the words would ease the burden of guilt. It had been with her ever since she left Blackmon. Her greatest fear was that somehow Welford had known how she had felt that somehow the knowledge led to his decline.

You were an exceptional wife. you were a much better friend to him than I. Not such a good friend. I fell in love with his wife.

He rose onto his elbow and cradled her face. I fell in love with you while we were at Blackmon, he admitted.

With a sad smile, she shook her head. it was lovely while we were there, but it was only fantasy.

We had no responsibilities. It was not real. for me, it was extremist real.

Because it mostly involves the bedchamber, and that is where you spend a great deal of your life.

Not so much as you might think. I have been with no girl since you. She hardly knew what to say.

I was going to take a lover, he confessed. but I could never work up any sort of enthusiasm for the search. Then I decided to take a wife, but no girl appealed to me. I finally realized why. None of them were you. I love you, Jannie.

This time, the words spoken with such intensity, resonated through her heart and soul.

I have from the moment I met you, he continued. not deeply of course, at first. But there was a spark, a twisting

of my heart, and I regretted that I had not met you before Welford. I thought if I had ...that you would have become mine. Ansley, please do not do this.

I know the timing could not be worse. You are far along with child' my child. A child I want to recognize as mine. Marry me, Jannie.

He had asked before, but she had not taken it seriously. Now his declarations and insistence terrified her. it would be scandalous. We have been scandalous before. It did not turn out so poorly. He splayed his fingers across her belly. I want to claim this child as mine.

That is what I wish whenever I see a star fall. That you and this child will be mine, and all of Rockville will know it. She skimmed her fingers up through his thick hair. you ask so much of me, she said.

He pressed a kiss to her temple, to her forehead, to her other temple. just consider the possibility. I truly consider it. That is all I ask.

He settled his mouth firmly over hers, taking possession as though he owned it. She let him. She welcomed him. It was more than she remembered. Perhaps because this time it was not the forbidden taking place in the shadows of

a terrace or a goodbye that nearly tore her heart from her chest.

It was a tentative beginning, a starting over. Something they had truly never had. Always before the scepter of scandal and the whisper of betrayal had loomed over them like black thunderclouds rolling over the lake on a winter evening.

She knew that tonight it would go no further than this: an exploring of heated mouths, soft groans, and low moans. She was not ready for more than this. Her emotions were too raw. But she took what he offered, allowed it to fill a

well that had gone dry. She had longed for so much more than what Welford could give her. And what he withheld from her had nothing to do with his paralyzed body. She knew that now.

He had always given the better part of himself to Madeline Black, while she received the crumbs. She deserved more. She deserved everything.

From the first Ansley had given it to her, had never held back, had always taken her needs into consideration, and placed them above her own. But it was not the real world. It was a secluded place where they had frolicked.

Drawing back, Ansley sipped at the corner of her mouth, then pressed his forehead against hers. Jannie, let me sleep with you tonight. To hold you. Nothing more. yes, she whispered.

Lifting his head, he gazed down on her. wishing upon stars seems to work. I want to get to know the real King of Ansley.

His smile flashed in the moonlight. you already do, sweetheart.

Over his shoulder, she saw a star shoot through the sky and made a wish. Forgive me, Welford.

12

There were few guards, He walked past the first gate without trouble. It did not mean anything, the Median palace had two gates that lead in and out. As she went, He made sure to pay extra attention to the path she took from the time she left the Guild walls.

It had been worse than she remembered. There had to have been a lot of magic to build a fire that big. It did not feel right even now, it had eaten everything too thoroughly, too quickly. As though it was driven. In places the only thing she had seen to tell her there had been homes there were the char marks lining the house borders.

So many homes-they had been burned to the ground. How many people had been in them?

Every occasionally, she had seen someone, the never dawdle in fact their eyes never left the ground. They were like a ghost, no more than a faint shadow upon sight and gone in the bat of an eye. He had nodded to a ghost that had not to disappear and watched as his near about died.

The closer she got to the last gate the fainter the traces of smoke and fog stay. Everything seemed untouched, from

the palace wall to the palace itself. He walked up to the gates preparing to enter.

'Halt!' He slowed down but did not stop. 'In the King's name halt!' She did not, not until she was across the threshold of the last gate and insight of the palace walls and a sword blocked any further movement. She turned to the man, guard, knight, who stopped her.

'What are you doing?' She asked him. 'I am not trespassing.'

'I am not to let you pass today, no one is allowed inside.'

Her brows furrowed. He was dressed in a full guard uniform. He bet he

was newly knighted. he looked young. A little younger than her. The mystery had few knights, unlike Ask who had armies of them. He stepped away letting him see her attire waiting for him to recognize what she posed as.

'Dancer-'

'He.' she winced, it was time to stop being so earnest and honest. 'No need for titles'

He ducked his head, eyes roaming over the grounds before grabbing her arm.

'Oy!' He yelled yanking to get free. 'Unhand me don't you know who I am?'

He gave her a dark look still pulling her for the shadows of the gate.

'No, I don't know who you are and that isn't important. It is what you are that concerns me.'

'You have something against dancers?'

'No, I do not. It is a bad omen for harm to come to a Dancer. That is why I am warning you to leave.'

He stared; she was so sure he was going to try something after pulling her into the shadows. Not warn her. 'I-'

'It is a curse to harm one of God's own.' he went on 'I will warn you.'

He leaned in closer. 'Warn me of what?'

'To leave.' he was solemn.

'Why would I do that?' he could have been teasing but his expression told her that he was not.

'Median is my home.'

'Your home would do you harm, it is better to leave.' he spat out the words

in distaste. He felt his arms shake; she could practically shell his own barely had feared. Her mouth went dry.

'What is happening here?' she whispered not wanting to be seen or heard any longer. Not if what he said was true. 'In- in the streets, they were ablaze. The Guild sent me here for answers.'

His grip tightens. 'All you need know is that you are no longer safe here, none of you are.'

'Why?'

'I do not know.' he lied, she felt it.

'Is it because of something going on within the palace?' What else could it be?

He would no longer meet her eye and He knew she had hit the center target. 'I know not.' he lied again.

'The University did nothing to stop that fire.' He murmured to him knowing that if he felt like it, he could very well charge her for treason for her words. 'Did they have something to do with it?'

'Again, I know not.' he lied again.

'You are hurting me.' His hold slackens but did not release.

'I hope nothing in the palace was destroyed or came to harm...' her shoulders rolled. 'I need to speak with the king now.'

'No.' she yelped as his grip tighten. 'You don't want to speak with him little Dancer.' she understood. Danger.

'The Queen is fine as well.'

'I cannot permit it.'

'Why not?'

'Because neither are in those walls.'

'Then who is in charge?'

'A good question I wish I knew the answer too. You do not want to speak to any of them.'

Interesting. He nodded. 'All right.' She pulled away and he let her go.

'You will leave here now. Don't come back until things get better.' He nodded and began to walk away, out of the shadows into the light. She walked through the gates, second to the first. She did not stop there, once she was out of the gates, she broke into a run not stopping until the palace became little more than a faint overcasting shadow and her chest burned with fire.

He was ready to head back to safety, back to the Guild and to- her. She wanted nothing more than to feel She is warm embrace around her, telling her everything was going to be okay or better yet wake her up from this nightmare, but it would not happen. That and she had one more stop to make.

The temple was really a district, a section of the city dedicated to the Gods. His hands never set foot here and never planned on it. The closer she got the better at picking them out she became. The temples stood tall, proud, and

immovable as the deep earth where a stone was buried.

A tall temple stood behind the rest, taller and grander than the six around it. That was the Mother temple. Where the Goddess was worshipped. Beside that pyramid stood one just as grand though shorter and more forlorn. He knew it was the temple of Gareth God of the Dead, he always stood at her right. The position a lover took the Mother and Gareth have been lovers since the beginning of time. They had five children whose temples surrounded their parents.

Dorn, he was one for prosperity and favored Door and Dorian born. I said that he gave birth to the Dorian people. Dorn was rarely worshipped outside of Dor. He was even disliked for his favoritism. His sisters Zeera and Tee lit were preferred to their brothers and another sister. Zeera and Tee lit were twins one of fire, Zeera. The other was the Goddess of water, Tee lit. They were so different yet- they were never able to stay without each other of long. The twins sat to the right at the temple at the feet of their father. Barb oden was the hunter, I gave his temple a quick once over. He

was his mother’s son and dislike by her lover.

He quickly passed the last temple. The last child of the Mother and Dark God was the one no one spoke about. Out of them all, she was the most feared and revered. Ucceith was the messenger of the Dark God, she and her maidens and hags went around collecting the souls of the dead taking them to one of the seven resting realms.

He headed for the Goddess’s temple. It was everything that she had expected and yet worse than she had feared. Bodies sat, lay, they filled the

streets lining them. Most seem all right, soot and dirt-covered but unharmed. The air smelled of smoke and human bodies. Some were crying, quietly, most were praying. Priestess and Priest moved around where they could be giving what they could. He turned away toward the other temple. The temple of the Dark God was not where she had planned to go but it felt necessary.

The stone was cold under her feet when she entered. It all slammed into her to be choked down. The shell of burnt flesh and hair. Death tried to suffocate her as she moved inward. He flagged down the first priestess she met. An older

middle-age woman carrying linen and a haggard worried look. She had not slept for a while. He is fingers curled around her arm.

'What your turn.' she was too tired to put a bite in her voice.

He studied her a moment longer before opening her mouth. 'I’m not here for help. I am here to help. What can I do?'

'He.' Rue’s voice called her, but she could not look up from the stitch she had to finish before the numbing cream worn off. They had wheedled out of her that she knew more than a little of

healing and set her to work treating and binding wounds. 'He.'

'I am almost done.' He finished the last stitch before tying it up. 'now what-'

Her breath caught in her chest as they stalked toward her. He got to her feet stumbling into Rue.

'He!' Honor came forward wrapping an arm around her friend. Alec prowled through the small row of bodies, a low growl emanating from his throat. He did not butt her and purr, he just growled, at her!

'Bad kit.' he told her. 'bad!'

'thank you, sister.' Honor nodded to Rue hauling He toward the exit. 'we will take care of her.' If Rue was going to protest one look from Alec stopped her as he brought up the rear leading the two women out into the night air.

He sways all the way home; she had not even realized how late it had gotten. Or how much her feet ache. A lot.

Her fingers felt swollen and numb from all the numbing cream she had used for doing stitches.

there had been a lot of gashes, twice that many burns. All of them moaned and talked to her while she

worked. Those who slept were talked to by worried family.

~*~

'He!'

The children had been worse. They cried and had nightmares, some of them did not have family around them. They were by far the worse.

'He?' there had been nothing to judge them by but their faces and that did not speak of much more than pain.

A roll of thunder echo around them. He blinked. When had they made it back to her room?

'While you were in La-de -la land.' Honor answered her unspoken question.

'Did you enjoy yourself?' Lily came to stand by her mate while tapping a dainty foot. He stepped away from the dangerous glint in her eye.

'-I-'

'I hope so because we sure had a blast. Do you have any idea how much fun it is to reassure two whining men over and over that you are all right and fraught their attempts to come after you!' He turned to Alec. He leaned on her knee low growls still rising from him. She felt it then, a more unnerving brooding gaze

burning through the side of her face. 'Her?' she turned to the room entrance where she knew he would be. Unsurprised to find him there, her mouth pressed into a line shriveling up under his glare.

She had seen him angry before but not murderous, not murderously intent on her alone. 'Her? I-' there was only one word to say that would make this right. It was the hardest word she had ever known. 'I’m sorry for worrying you.' She held out her hand to Alec as a peace offering. 'Forgive me?'

'I forgive you.' Alec butted her leg. 'Never again. Good kits don’t do that.' She would have told him she would try not to if he had asked a question. He let it go. Turning to the last hostile stare in the room. He took in a deep breath.

Then there was one. She leaned against the wall, arms crossed and relaxed. His whole frame was relaxed and lazy. His face betrays everything, He knew just how angry he was. 'I’m sorry.' she offered to extend a hand to him. He did not look at it. 'I just meant to do a little stop and then I-' she had seen all the children. Rue had told her what was needed, and she got swept up in her

work. She had done what she could but there was still so much more.

Honestly, how was she supposed to know the sun had sunken down into the ground. 'You shouldn’t have worried.' He continued.

'He don’t-'

'I’m fine.' she announced to them all. Plopping back against the bedpost. Lily winced, Honor just knocked her forehead into her palm, repeatedly. What was wrong with them?

'No.' The voice to answer was chilling and cool. He shuddered. 'You’re not.' He stared as She transformed into a

moving, living thing instead of a glowering statue. 'You would do it repeatedly until we found you.'

He clicked her tongue not bothering to disagree. He was right. 'So, here is what is going to happen, Princess, for your misdoings-'

'What!' He jumped up indignant. 'I didn't do anything wrong!' She sways on her feet but stayed vertical.

'No, but you did something very stupid.' He went on coming nearer.

'Bad Kit.' Alec brushed her knee. 'you are naughty for scaring us.' He glared down at the little traitor. When

Lily and Honor made no move to interfere on her behalf, He backed away from the boys she adored. The back of her knees bumped into the bed. She glared at the two of them.

'You wouldn’t.' She told them flatly crossing her arms. Putting more conviction into her tone. 'You. Would. Not. Dare.' To her horror, she came to find out that not only would they, but they also did.

When they returned to the house, he followed her into her bedchamber. She clambered onto the bed, then watched, mesmerized, as he removed his jacket and

waistcoat. He did not even bother to look in the direction that he tossed them, but they landed with unerring accuracy on the chair anyway, and she wondered how often he had followed those same motions. His movements were fluid, confident. He sauntered over to the bed, sat on the edge, and placed her bare feet on his lap. Slowly, he kneaded the ball of one foot and then the other.

You are so very skilled at this, she said.

He rubbed his hands over the arch of both feet. I am skilled at many things. His gaze holding hers, he moved

his fingers in ever-widening circles up to her ankles. His eyes darkened into a challenge. but there is one thing I have never done.

His hands moved higher, carrying her nightdress with it, reminding her of their first night together. She clamped her knees together. Ansley, we cannot.

I am aware of that, but what I want now ...I want to see your belly. I want to see where the child grows. Ansley'

How could she refuse such a heartfelt plea? Licking her lips, she nodded.

Ever so slowly, as though he were unwrapping a precious gift, he moved her nightdress up over her knees, past her hips, up to her chest. He placed his hands on either side of her waist and studied her increasing girth.

So, beautiful, he whispered. He lifted his gaze to hers, and she could see the wonder in the green. You are so beautiful, Jannie.

Lowering his head, he placed a kiss on the spot where their child' for this moment in time it was theirs' grew. Straightening, he drew her nightdress back down to her ankles.

I am glad you are here. I am glad the child will be born here.

He joined her that night, beneath the sheets. His body warm and familiar. Comforting. He did not tempt them with passionate kisses or sensual caresses, but he held her near, stroked her back, her arm, her hip. They lay on their sides, facing each other, talking quietly. About his brothers and their families. About his mother and Lenny. Her parents were deceased, and she found mercy in that for they would not know the questionable things she had done.

When she fell asleep, his arms were around her, and she felt safe, protected, and, for the first time since Blackmon, she was not lonely.

Jannie awoke alone to thunder booming and rain slashing against the windows.

After ringing for Lily, she climbed out of bed and walked to the window. It was a gray, gray day.

No walks in the garden, but she could stroll through the manor. She was unfamiliar with a good bit of it. She had only been here for the duchess's wedding. Then she had done no exploring. Surely,

he would not mind if she did so today. She would ask him over breakfast.

But after she was dressed and went downstairs to the breakfast dining room, she discovered that he was not there.

He is already eaten, my woman, the butler told her. he is in his study now, working. Would you like me to escort you there?

No, that is quite all right. I shall just have something to eat and then I believe I shall stroll through the residence if there are no objections.

None- he informed me that you must leave to treat the house as though it were your own. If there is anything you want seen to; you have but to ask.

Nodding, she turned away and went to the sideboard where an abundance of food waited. She had been unable to eat in the early months and lost her appetite after Welford passed, but now she was famished. She ate so much that she thought she might burst. When she was finished, she strolled through the residence, imagining herself as lover here.

At the top of the landing, in one of the wings, was a portrait gallery. The windows stretched the length of the room. She sat in a chair and watched the storm rolling over the land. It was beautiful, yet powerful. It rivaled all the emotions roiling through her.

All the feelings for Ansley that she'd squashed were rising to the fore' so quickly, so forcefully. She loved being in his presence. She loved the way he made her feel treasured. He would do the same for the child. She could not imagine this child growing up and not walking within his shadow.

Stephen proposed to Mercy there.

With a start, she smiled and glanced back over her shoulder. He looked so relaxed, so at home. To spend all her days and nights with him ...if only this child would wait a year to be born.

Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to her forehead before sitting in the chair beside hers. Did you eat this morning?

Like someone with no manners. Two plates' worth. You have a wonderful cook. I will let her know. I could do that. See to your menus. you are not here to tend to my needs.

I shall go stark raving mad if I have nothing to do because then all I have are my thoughts for distraction. I do not like the directions they go. Do they want to take you away from here?

Slowly she shook her head. no, they consider staying.

The pleasure reflected in his eyes warmed her, and she gave her attention back to the rain. you have no fox hunting here. no. What do you do when you entertain? shooting. Have lots of birds. are you skilled with a rifle, then?

I am somewhat of an expert shooter, yes. Considered proving for

Cousin Green. I do not really blame him, you know. He has so much to gain.

But he could have gone about it differently. I should have spoken to you instead of the gossips.

Is that what you would have done?

I suspect I'd have done nothing' or at the very least, I'd have given you time to mourn.

Inconsiderate lout.

She smiled at his disgust with Cousin Green. you take his accusations personally.

He is threatening to make my child's life miserable. I will not stand for it, Jannie. If you do not marry me, I shall bring the full weight of my title to bear against him. even if he is, right? It is a dilemma.

He did not remind her that it could all go away if she married him. Cousin Green might not care about making her unhappy. Ansley obviously did. She wanted to erase the furrow between his brows. She nodded toward the outdoors. What is that building over there? It was brick and stone. Long. A short distance from the residence.

My pool. I should show it to you when we go on a walk.

By afternoon, the rain had stopped, and they strolled through the garden. Then he took her to the pool.

It was long and narrow, the water still, except for the steam rising from the surface. Steps led down into it.

So, you just swim across it? She asked.

Yes- back and forth. It is not very deep. Even if you do not swim, you could go into it. It would be like taking a bath in a huge tub. He laughed. not exactly. I should like to watch you swim sometime.

I suspect I will be doing a good bit of it at night.

She stared at him. really? Why ever would you swim at night?

He cupped her face. you really do not understand how irresistible you are, do you?

Tilting her head back, he lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was gentle. An exploring, a communicating. Before him, she had never realized that kisses could take a variety of shapes and forms.

Softly, provocatively, he teased her senses. She found herself leaning into him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

He undid no buttons, lifted no hems, and yet she felt as though he were making love to her.

He could convey so much with his lips, with his fingers lightly touching her cheeks, his thumbs slowly circling at the corners of her mouth. She wanted to fall into him, against him. She wanted him to lie her down and kiss all of her.

All thoughts of anything beyond the two of them disappeared when he gave her such undivided attention. Would he still be kissing her like this when they were old? Was it only the newness or the

lure of the forbidden that spurred him on now?

Ansley's stomach clenched. It was too soon for Jannie to have given birth. Dear God in heaven, do not let her have lost the child.

Opening the message, he stared at the words that had no meaning.

It is with the heaviest of hearts that I inform you that Welford is dying. He asks that you bring his jewels.

The coach traveled down the road, the horses galloping as fast as the coachman could drive them.

Without truly being aware of his surroundings, Ansley stared out the window as the trees and sloping land flashed by. The jewels were safe. He had them in hand. But delivering them seemed like such a terribly bad idea.

Welford is dying.

He had hosted a fox hunt a few short weeks ago, and all was well. How could he be dying? It did not signify.

Ansley caught sight of the large boulder that marked the beginning of Welford's property. He remembered how Jannie had ordered him to stop when she saw it. He wanted to call up for the driver

to stop now. He did not want to continue to Herndon Hall; he did not want to see his friend diminished by death. Why had he stopped his visits? Fish needed to be caught, foxes chased, and horses are ridden. Conversations over whiskey needed to be had.

He had thought himself unselfish to leave them in peace, but now he wanted every moment back. Death had come with no warning.

Only three years separated them. What would he do if he had only three years to live? What if it were something they had done together that resulted in

this decline? What if he could have prevented it? Had he failed his cousin once again?

The recriminations swirled through him as the coach turned onto the road leading through the estate. The trees were heavy with leaves awaiting the first breath of summer. Gorgeous. He saw a fox peer out through the brush and then dash away. It would still be here for this year's hunt, but Welford would not. It was impossible to contemplate. Herndon Hall without Welford... The coach slowed ‘stay here’ and he leaped out before it stopped. Although he dashed up the steps, it

seemed he was not moving at all. He barged through the door.

The butler came to attention. your Grace. is he in his bedchamber? yes, Your Grace. the marchioness? She is not left by his side.

He raced up the stairs, taking them two at a time, his heart pounding to an erratic rhythm. At least he was not too late.

He hesitated for a moment outside the bedchamber to gather himself, regain a calm facade. Then he shoved the door open and strode in.

Although the windows were open, the room shilled of sickness and death. The sunlight was doing a poor job of battling the shadows. His gaze fell on the frail figure lying in the bed, then it shifted to the girl sitting in a chair beside it. Ansley.

His name was only a whisper upon her lips, hers a shout within his heart. She rose and walked around the bed. His gaze at once dropped to her belly. Was it slightly more rounded than it had been before? Impossible to tell. She touched it self-consciously. Tears brimmed in her eyes. She was a girl who should never have cause to weep. thank

you so much for coming, she said. How could you think I would not? As ill-advised as it was, he stepped forward and cradled her face between his hands. He could see the toll Welford's illness had taken on her, yet still, she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her courage, her strength, were all too visible. She was battered but not defeated. how could this have happened? He asked.

Looking momentarily lost, she shook her head. I do not know. His body is poisoned. someone is trying to kill him. No, no. His physician says that Welford's body has turned on him. It has stopped

functioning properly. He is inflicted with a deadly fever. There is no hope.

He slid his easily her arms and took her hands into his. I have brought my physician, Dr. Roberts. He is excellent. We will see what he has to say.

More tears welled in her eyes. I am so glad you are here. I didn't know whether to send you' of course, you should have.

He would have it no other way. I do not know why he was so insistent that you bring him his jewels. I do not know what he expects to do with them. he has not told you about them, then?

No. I do not even know what kind they are. Rubies. Emeralds. Diamonds. What does it matter?

It mattered.

Ansley? Welford croaked. is that you, old man?

Ansley gave Jannie's hands a final squeeze of reassurance before he strode over to the bed. Jannie followed, her footfalls soft until she was standing at its foot, one hand wrapped around a post as though she needed the support to still be upright. How difficult this had to be for her. Welford looked bloody awful. His skin had an unnatural pallor to it. His eyes

held no life at all. always in want of attention, aren't you, Welford?

His cousin released a weak laugh. I was always the more interesting of us. still are. did you bring them? Did you bring my jewels? they are here. I left them in the coach. I need to see them.

He glanced quickly to the side, to Jannie, before turning his attention back to Welford. you have not told Jannie about them.

No- you do ...that. You owe me ...that. His breathing rattled; each breath labored. it is your fault, you know.

Your fault I am here. Wilford, no, Jannie pleaded. do not say these things.

It is all right, Jannie, Ansley said. let him have his say. He deserved the verbal lashing. So, he stoically held his friend and cousin's gaze.

See? He knows it is true. Just as I have been telling you. It is his fault. Welford struggled to push himself up, and Ansley stepped forward to help him, to settle him back against the pillows. if only you had given me the bloody reins, I would not have been forced to take them from you.